

Disclaimer: Would anyone actually believe me if I said that I did own Harry Potter? Thought not.

Notes/Warnings: Alright, there's a mild warning for language...though since I'm pretty much not using any swear words, this warning might not even be important. Aside from that, there will be no slash in this story, but there might be a bit of romance. But, let's face it: romance isn't my strong point so it won't be central to the story. There will be a semi-powerful! Harry.

## Chapter One

The stench of sweat clawed through the air.

"Ha-dri-an!" The crowd roared in glee. "Ha-dri-an!"

Come on - hit me! Harry Potter, alias Hadrian, waited for the swaying Goyle look-alike to make his move. A grin was stretched across his lips, the thrill of competition sending a delicious rush through him. Go on -

"Argh!" his opponent bellowed and launched himself at him, completely throwing all thoughts of using his wand out the window.

Harry's grin widened. White-blond hair flashing, he darted past his victim's wild punch with a speed that tore gasps from the audience's throats. Goyle 2.0's momentum sent him stumbling into the spot Harry had vanished from.

Got you now. Harry pivoted and smashed the blade of his foot in a deadly arc on the Goyle clone's temple. His pseudo school nemesis' imitation crumpled onto the floor and savage screams erupted for Hadrian's latest victory.

London's dueling club, Harry's patron club, shouted out what they were owed after winning their bets on him. The occasional person applauded while others futilely hammered against the wards preventing anyone but the competitors from entering and leaving the dueling arena.

Harry felt a mingle of delight and concern as he eyed his unconscious opponent, the top the Manchester underground dueling club offered. He hoped he wasn't too badly hurt. "Let's give another shout of approval to the still-reigning dueling champion, Hadrian!" The commentator demanded unnecessarily.

Harry cracked a grim smile. No-holds bar duels, where everything from magic to swords and first could be used, were messy. They always ended brutally.

But if he wanted experience in real life battles to prepare himself for fighting Voldemort, not to mention to keep the deal he'd made with Uncle Vernon, they were essential. In actual skirmishes, no one stood on the opposite ends of platforms against only one opponent, had carefully enforced rules, and used generic auror fighting styles.

Knowing the drill by now, Harry walked slowly around the arena, pumping his arm in the air like he'd seen the wrestlers Vernon watched on TV do. He had to wonder if the throngs of spectators would still be cheering if they knew that the mysterious Hadrian was actually the sixteen year old Boy Who Lived under glamour charms. He guessed that the club's merciless patrons wouldn't be pleased to learn that the Light's poster boy had squeezed his way into their midst.

Well, one thing's for sure, he decided. It wouldn't do well for his already sinking public opinion, courtesy of Scrimgeour, to discover that the Chosen One was fighting bloody, illegal battles in an underground dueling club. Such organizations were banned for the last century for good reason.

The commentator smirked at the crowd's reaction. "It seems that even though the pretender resorted to Muggle means, Hadrian's unsurpassed agility and strength once again caused him to dominate the duel. Healer!" He flicked his fingers lazily to where Harry's opponent lay, still knocked out from his crescent kick. Two men, their muscles almost exploding from beneath their robes, dragged the body off the arena floor.

Harry couldn't help but be surprised yet against when the crowd passed a bag around, the golden glint of galleons pouring inside it. The sheer amount was daunting, but at a championship like this, he supposed it was to be expected.

Now maybe he'd be able to 'afford his keep' at the Dursleys, in Uncle 'Vermin's words as well as the new prescription glasses his eyes had been begging him to purchase. This summer, he'd suddenly been needing a new one every week, and Vernon had refused to pay after the first month was up.

Harry frowned as he swiped at the cut across his lip, ignoring the sting. Ever since the end of his fifth year, his physical strength had been growing exponentially for reasons only Merlin would know – and his eyesight seemed to be improving along with it.

Loud voices tore through his thoughts. "Is this all our champion deserves, ladies and gentlemen?" More animalistic shrieks detonated through the masses. "Well, we'll just have to fix that, won't we? Let's give it up for our next ambitious pretender for Hadrian's prestigious title! The one, the only-!"

The lights died. Crimson blared back on. It was a signal, meaning the worst.

"Aurors!" The commentator bellowed, the fact that his voice was already under the Sonorous Charm causing everyone in the vicinity to come close to deaf. "Evacuate immediately!"

Harry swore; there was no way he could afford to let the Ministry see what he was doing. There had already been enough rumors regarding the state of his sanity and his 'allegiances' after the Tri-Wizard Tournament. Hadrian's true identity was certain to come up during a trial, and he wasn't looking for a nightmarish remix.

"This is the Department of Magical Law Enforcement! Remain calm and-"

Utter pandemonium erupted before the order even finished, and Harry wondered why the aurors even bothered. Seizing his chance,

he leaped towards the door reserved for entering the arena, ignoring the enraged and horrified cacophony howling from behind him. The stifling grip of anti-apparation wards smothered the air, and Harry dove towards the nearest office in the hall, knowing that there would be a fireplace for emergencies just like this one.

“Alohomora!” he snapped at the door. It swung open and he plowed through it, scouring the walls for a familiar jar of emerald green powder.

“Stupefy!”

Harry automatically hurled himself into a shoulder roll, landing back on his feet and slamming down a shield just as another bolt of red light speared towards him. “Expelliarmus!” he cried, jumping to the left as he anticipated the auror’s next move.

The surprised auror just managed to evade the spell, his eyes narrowing as he took in Hadrian’s young appearance. If only he knew just how young, Harry thought to himself. He had no doubt that his knowledge of curses, hexes, and charms were not as broad as the auror’s and he didn’t have any training aside from his illegal duels. Still, those were hardly miniscule experiences and with his newly-developing, unnervingly fast reflexes and movements, it was irrelevant.

Harry leaned back, ducking another curse. His eyes darted around the room. In only a few seconds, dozens of aurors would run through the door. No doubt by now the Floo was blocked. Any auror worth his salt would have taken care of that before the raid had even began.

Scowling to himself for even searching for the Floo in the first place, he Summoned the bookshelf just behind the auror. The cabinet rammed into the auror’s back, sending him skidding across the floor.

“Stupefy,” Harry hissed at his dazed attacker. With a frail, stupid hope, he stuffed his hand in the Floo jar and threw the fine powder into the awaiting flames. They sputtered green, gave a final gasp, and vanished. Harry ground his teeth in frustration. Footsteps pounded down the hall.

With no time to think, he ripped the auror's robe uniform off him and threw it over himself, rapidly tossing one glamour over another onto his face. Hopefully, it replicated the face before him. He pointed his holly wand at the fallen law enforcer and Disillusioned him.

Drowning out the snarls of the captured spectators from his hearing, Harry donned the hood and slipped out of the room, jogging towards the exit. Passing aurors ignored him as they dashed past, and Harry reached the exit without interruption.

Hip-Hop music beat against the ground. Neon lights slipped over his face. Harry froze, despising his luck. Of all places the dueling club had to be hidden beneath, it was a Muggle nightclub. Knockturn Alley had apparently been dubbed too obvious.

Well, he couldn't afford to wait. Eventually an actual auror would come out and question why he wasn't doing his job apprehending the people inside. He elbowed his way past the couples, disregarding the odd looks they were stabbing him because of his wizard clothing.

"Hey, watch it!"

"Jerk!"

"Loser – go play dress up with somewhere else!"

"Ouch!"

Clutching his wand tightly, he whispered a Notice-Me-Not spell, feeling the ancient power cover him like spider webs. The Muggles continued to protest and wince, with Harry mumbling distracted apologies as he concentrated on escaping. Stupid Apparation age restriction, he growled to himself. Stupid risk of splinching...

Without a thought, he shoved past the club bouncer. Surprised gasps came from the waiting line as they supposedly witnessed an invisible force knock the 250 pound, six foot five man to the ground. "Sorry," Harry winced. If only Hermione was here, then she could help him

research how he had obtained this inexplicable strength – and reprimand him about forgetting to keep it in check.

The cool night air breathed against his face as he left, tossing his stolen cloak into a nearby bush and canceling the glamour charms. A tall and lean Harry Potter emerged in Hadrian's place, his sleek, inky hair tousled by the light breeze. Half in annoyance, half in relief, he commented to himself, No one would dare accuse the Boy Who Lived of being in a fight club.

He glanced one last time behind him before shaking his head. The people in those clubs knew the risk. It was an unsaid rule that once the aurors came, everyone was on their own. Harry wasn't confident enough to claim that he could take down an entire auror squad singlehandedly.

They'll get a fine at most, he sighed. Was it weird that he was willing to protect criminals?

Although you technically qualify as one, you know.

Wonderful, he replied sarcastically to that uppity voice of reason. Running a hand through his hair, he found the nearest bus stop and lifted his wand, summoning the Knight Bus.

A/N: To anyone who's reading this story, thanks! This chapter was ridiculously short, so, as you can tell from that statement, the rest will be longer. I'll warn you all that I'll probably be using American English accidentally, though I'm trying to stick to British English.

Thanks for reading!

## Chapter Two

Harry stepped off the Knight Bus, his lips twisting into a scowl as he was tortured by the oh-so-familiar sight of Number Four Privet Drive. Lair of the Dursleys. The 2 AM night oozed over the sickeningly immaculate lawn and bushes like oil. The living room light was still on.

Gritting his teeth, Harry flexed his wand arm, his wand vanishing into the concealed holster. Uncle Vermin would be waiting for him; thank Merlin the tracer on his wand had been destroyed ever since he'd started dueling. He wouldn't have to take his relative's rubbish if they were ever in a foul mood again.

With an absent flick of his hand, the locked clicked open, and Harry narrowed his eyes against the dim light. "Where have you been, boy?" came the snarl. It seemed that a purple walrus in pajamas had decided to stay up waiting for him on the sofa.

His vivid emerald eyes latching onto Vernon's pudgy face, he deadpanned, "Out." Vernon sputtered, his already purple tint threatening to migrate to the veins on his neck. Harry stepped into the room and tossed his bag of winnings into the man's lap. "Here," he snapped. "I have the money. Now keep your end of the bargain."

Vernon's beady eyes gleamed. Like an excited, greedy child, his hand dove into the bag and fished out a golden galleon. "Say boy..." he licked his lips, "this is a good haul. What did you do today?"

"I was invited to compete against the other clubs' champions," Harry replied shortly. "Illegal club champions." Vernon didn't even look up. He was already caressing the silver bracelet snaking through the treasures.

Didn't this lard of an uncle even feel slightly concerned that his nephew was doing something very likely going to be the end of him one day, underage, too? Or concerned that if Harry was grievously injured, they couldn't turn to the law because of incrimination? Well, of course not, Harry responded sarcastically to himself. After all, he doesn't want to know about my 'freaky habits'. Besides, 'what happens in your world, stay in your world'. He might

loath his 'family', but that didn't mean the fact that they completely, utterly didn't care didn't hurt, even if it was only slightly.

"I want new contacts. This more than covers them. And I want to go to Diagon Alley – and with no repercussions if Petunia or Dudley find out."

"Ssh! Not so loud boy!" Vernon hissed, jerking his hand in an obvious 'sit' motion toward the sofa opposite him. Harry reluctantly settled himself down. Vernon eyeballed the wizard, taking in his dirty appearance and the sweat still clinging onto his skin. He was still wearing the loose fitting dragon-hide shirt and pants, a lower grade protection against vicious spells. Beneath his dark cloak, he still wore a silvery katana strapped to his back. The club would be missing a part of its inventory. He would have to return it later.

His nose wrinkled, but at Harry's icy stare he didn't dare order him to stand up again. Instead, he muttered something under his breath, thinking that 'the freak' wouldn't hear.

Harry bit back a retort as he heard each word, perfectly. His eyesight and strength hadn't been the only improvement over the summer. Almost anything related to his body and senses seemed to be going through some ridiculous form of an upgrade.

Harry let Dursley finish whining about how 'the freak' had no consideration for the cleanliness of his sofa. Brief irritation itched his skin, then died. It wasn't as if he wasn't used to this, especially since part of the deal Vernon had struck with Harry involved keeping himself and the rest of the Dursleys, who didn't know about the arrangement, from insulting him. At least in anything over a grumble. Since Petunia and Dudley didn't know that Harry was technically paying the Dursley's bills, however, they hadn't been keen to take on Vernon's mysterious change in attitude.

Harry still couldn't tell if it was a curse or a blessing that his gluttonous Uncle had been demoted recently.

"Contacts'?" Vernon finally snorted. "Grunnings doesn't pay for our medical insurance. Those ruddy things will cost over 400 pounds!"



"I've given you more than enough!"

"Be quiet!" He hissed, glancing nervously up the stairs before lumbering off the sofa towards Harry's glaring form. "Dudleydum's birthday is a week from now, and we aren't going to get you something as unnecessary as contacts! We'll be spending that on his presents. Is that understood?"

An untamed fire blazed in Harry's eyes. "Look, Vermin," he snapped, "I need those contacts!"

"Don't use that tone with me you ungrateful boy! You need a new prescription every week! Getting another one is useless!"

"How," Harry ground out, reigning in his temper, "will I be able to compete properly if I can't see properly? The audience doesn't award losers."

The two glowered at each other, Dursley fuming, his putrid breath determined to poison Harry's nose, and Harry returning the look calmly, his jaw clenched. "Wednesday," the walrus growled. "We'll get your bloody contacts on Wednesday. But just you remember, boy: one word to Petunia, one word to Dudley about our deal, or any of your freaky business..."

"And the deal's off," Harry fought the urge to roll his eyes. "I know. We've been through his before." Vernon grunted and waddled off to coddle the rest of the spoils Harry had won for him. "And Diagon Alley?"

Vernon's blood vessels once again came into danger of exploding. "Whenever you like! As long as you get me enough money by next week..." The failed attempt at a threat lingered in the air. Harry turned and strode up the stairs, his obsidian-black cloak unfurling as he walked. Silently, he opened his measly excuse for a bedroom door and slid inside. His school books now lay unconcealed on his bed, another courtesy of the deal he'd made. He wouldn't have any of his magical things restricted, as long as no one saw, and that he kept it

only in his room. Hedwig hooted at him from inside her cage, and Harry felt a slight smile tug on his lips.

“Hey girl,” he murmured, sitting down to take off his boots. His eyes started to itch and he took off his contacts, replacing them with the infamous Potter glasses. Vernon’s heavy steps plunked against the stairs. It was a miracle that the rest of the snoring Dursley’s didn’t wake up. Twirling his wand in his fingers, he muttered, “scourgify” on his clothes, knowing that he couldn’t risk having Petunia wash them. The woman could only take so much.

He collected his pajamas and started to head towards the bathroom across the hall for a shower, when a flash of red light snagged his attention. Frowning, Harry climbed towards the window.

Red, green, and blue light shot through the street. Spells.

Harry swore. By Gryffindor’s sword, what were wizards doing in Little Whinging? Surely he hadn’t left a trail for the Aurors...?

No, Aurors wouldn’t be shooting spells out in the middle of a Muggle town. Death Eaters, then? No, the blood wards were almost impenetrable. They wouldn’t waste their time trying, and, besides, Voldemort wanted him for himself.

He considered just going to sleep. If they were Death Eaters or Aurors, they wouldn’t be getting in anytime soon...unless this was the Order coming to summon their Golden Boy again.

A familiar guilty feeling wrenched his gut at the sarcasm. Was he really going to tarnish Dumbledore’s memory every time he thought about the Order? As much as he resented being sheltered and kept in the dark, he wasn’t going to hold a grudge when he would have likely done the exact same thing in the headmaster’s position.

He never wanted to be a hero, but he supposed that was what he was: the one person out of a million who would be willing to sacrifice everything he had – his life, his happiness, and everything else – for innocents. For the Greater Good.

No matter how unfair it was to himself, and even when it should never even be expected of one person.

Sirius's death had finally spurred him to take his despicable task seriously. Murder or be murdered. Be a hero, a savior. He devoured spell and dueling books at a rate that frightened even Hermione. Dumbledore's death had only fed the flames.

"Yes, that's me," Harry mumbled under his breath. "The sacrificial victim." Sighing to himself, he tore off his black robes, snatched his invisibility cloak, and stuffed on his boots. There wasn't anything positive that could explain the battle outside, Order or not.

Stupid hero complex. Stupid prophecy.

Drawing his wand, he held his breath and crept to the door of the house. An inky silhouette flickered across a pool of moonlight. Harry's eyes narrowed. The streetlights were dead.

A rustle disturbed Petunia's impossibly well trimmed rose bushes. A crunch of footsteps broke a small branch on the ground. Harry jerked his wand in its direction.

"Show yourself," he demanded as softly as he could of the darkness.

Silence. Then, slowly, a girl's tentative face emerged from behind the foliage, her blonde hair tumbling restlessly down her back.

"Luna?" he gaped. Luna gazed back at him, her dreamy blue eyes unusually serious. "What-?"

"Don't," she half-whispered, half-ordered. The Ravenclaw pried herself from the roses' grasp and grabbed his sleeve. "You have to come with me. We have to get out of here."

"Luna-" He stopped short, noticing for the first time the strange, silvery robes veiling her slender shoulders. A glistening rune of a circle embedded in a triangle with a line streaking down its center flashed against the velvety cloth.

She tugged him forward. "We can't delay, Harry! The Nargles will be here any moment!" She glanced back at him, a pleading look haunting her face. "The rest of us are holding them off, but-"

"Luna," Harry interrupted, "what in blazes are you talking about? We have to help those...wait, what do you mean 'we'? You're involved with," he hurled a finger at the crossfire, "that?"

"Reducto!" a voice bellowed.

BOOM! Plaster and plants now freed from the soil were vomited into the air, the innards of the house across the street.

A shrill scream pierced the air; number 8 Privet Drive's lights flickered on.

"Oh no..." he groaned. Mrs. Richards poked her frantic head out of her bedroom window.

"Help! Vagabonds! Thieves!" She shrieked. In a heartbeat, number 6 Privet Drive awakened.

Luna yanked his attention back. "Correction: we are involved with that."

"You're insane!"

"I know. It's the Nargles' fault. After all, after keeping it a secret for so long, what can you expect?" She replied pleasantly. Dashing from down the street with Harry in tow, she added, "I didn't think that, of all people you'd be the one to start this, though!"

"What are you talking about?" Harry yelled, not even caring that he was in danger of waking up the entire neighborhood. For the second time tonight, someone told him to be quiet.

Luna paled, darting a look over Harry's broader shoulders. The spells ceased, and the unnerving patter of footsteps and claws scratching against pavement made their way towards them. "You mean, you didn't do it?"

“Do what?”

“Unlock the Hallows.” She bit her lip. “I suspected that you had one after you told me about your father’s cloak, but-”

“What’s a Hallow? Who’s unlocking a Hallow?” Harry scowled. “Look, I don’t have time for this! We have to help-”

“Incendio!”

The tree above them erupted in flames. Harry reflexively dove out of the way of an incoming Expelliarmus, dragging Luna with him. He hoisted her up and threw back a stunner. “Run,” Luna shouted at him, squelching down a ‘thank you’. There wasn’t time. “No, don’t argue! Trust me, Harry, just run!”

Biting down a Gryffindorish urge to charge at his attackers, he rushed after Luna. “Tell me what this is all about!”

She panted, “My father and I...are members of the Will.” Harry answered with a blank look. “You honestly don’t... know? But you’re the one...who’s supposed to be ...unlocking the...Hallows! It...has your magical signature...all over it!”

“Protego!” Harry slammed down a shield in front of them just in time. He squinted, cursing his useless glasses and his partially good eyes. Was that a creature tearing down the street after them?

“We’re too late,” Luna lamented. “They’ve sensed what you, or the other you, if my guess is right, is trying to do, and they aren’t happy with you, Harry.”

“So I’m not just imagining – that?” He exclaimed. In one breath he fired off, “Glacies! Caliga! Reducto!” The rhinoceros-seized beast charging down after them howled as the spells slapped its thick hide, but didn’t stop.

“Nargles are highly resistant to magic,” Luna commented vaguely.

Harry didn't have time to shoot her an incredulous look. That thing was a Nargle? "Then we'll just have to change tactics. Glacies!" He launched a torrent of ice at the street, freezing the ground before the Nargles' clawed paws. With a bizarre squeak and yelp, it skidded on the glazed surface.

Luna clasped a golden thread around her neck and wove it around Harry's, the ancient rune stones strung through it clinking gently against each other. "I know I'm going to regret this," she sighed, "but we don't have much choice. It's opening, and it will only close, at least for now, if either you go in, or your other self goes through."

"What's this?"

"It will bring you back. Don't lose it; it's the only one we have left. Now put on the cloak and—" A beastly snarl interrupted whatever nonsense Luna was tossing out at him. The 'Nargle' had scrambled to its feet. "Incepto!"

The Emerald green runes blazed. Instantly Harry felt his body seized by some unidentified force. His vision went blank. His hearing and all his senses vanished. What's happening? he shouted, but his vocal cords weren't responding. A slick, eerie, membranous touch encased his body like mud.

As suddenly as it came, the sensations disappeared. Harry gasped, filling his lungs with air. Merlin, what was that? He stumbled forward, caught himself, and spun to point his wand at the Nargle—

-which wasn't there.

Harry glanced around. The street was silent; the spells that had been catapulted across the driveways and had demolished white picket fences were no longer there. Cautiously, his eyes flickered towards the artificial light streaking across the blacktop. The streetlights were on again.

A feeling of wrongness swept the air out of him. Why the sudden silence? How did the lights switch on without him seeing anything?

Where was the Nargle, if that was really what it was? And...where was Luna?

"Blast," he cursed, and rapidly darted out of the street. It was one of the golden rules of dueling: never leave yourself exposed. He could evaluate the situation behind a neighbor's car. The blonde, dreamy girl was nowhere in sight. Harry waited, watching and listening.

It was quiet enough that he could hear the streetlight humming. Trying another tactic, he tilted his head to the side, listening to the faint rumbles from the house next door. The duet of what could have passed as a hyena and an elephant wheezed out of the bedroom – number eight Privet Drive was sleeping.

This doesn't make any sense at all. His eyes narrowed. They were just screaming bloody murder a second ago!

He scanned the neighborhood once again, but saw nothing out of the ordinary. Fine, he thought. I'll get behind the blood wards and figure this out from there. May as well be protected while I think...Harry turned and headed to the Dursley's lawn and paused. An old sign he hadn't seen there before was planted firmly in front of the house.

'SALE', it read in large letters. 1,000,000 pounds.

Thanks for telling me weren't moving, was Harry's sarcastic response. He must have missed it when he returned from dueling. He was in a rush.

The more vindictive part of him gloated that it was priced at almost 400,000 pounds less than what it should have been, if anything Uncle Vernon had been saying was around the mark.

He purposely walked across the lawn instead of the pathway in a pitiful revenge and turned the doorknob to the hose. It was locked; Vernon must have decided to stay inside and not investigate the noise. Harry absently flicked his wand and it clicked open.

The annoying feeling that something wasn't right prickled his back. The Dursley's were either awake, or some miracle had cured their snoring. If it was the former, it unnerved him that he couldn't hear them stirring. Normally, they made enough noise to cause him to entomb his face in a pillow trying to drown out the scuffles. The fact that he still couldn't hear anything even with his improved hearing flipped his stomach upside down.

"Hello?" Why are you whispering? There's nothing wrong with a little quiet...His fingers clenched around his wand. His heart thumped against his chest. All his instincts were screaming at him. He tried to tell himself he was being idiotic, but it didn't quell the nauseating feeling.

Taking a breath, he peered up the stairs. Now that he thought about it, the whole was unnaturally clean, silent, and warm. It was July, and the AC wasn't on. Were the Dursley's trying to boil themselves? "I wish," he muttered. His eyes were drawn to the answering machine, its read light flashing. On impulse, he walked over, threw a silencing charm, and pressed 'play'.

"Hi Charlotte," a man's voice started. "I couldn't reach you on your cell phone, so I figured you'd be here. Look, I know you're determined to sell this one, but the company's decided to forget it. No one will buy it. For goodness sakes, it has two cases of unexplained insanity and a murder! That one has the police baffled, too. It's been years since someone even decided to rent it, and you know how long that lasted. Let's just let the city council bulldoze it, and move on, 'right? We're spending too much money maintaining something that's history won't let it look good."

The other messages rambled on about clients and other useless things, but Harry wasn't listening. A murder? Two cases of insanity?

A tremor of panic seized him. "Uncle Vernon! Aunt Petunia!" He pounded up the stair three at a time, not even caring how much trouble he'd be in. He ripped open Dudley's bedroom door. "Dudley-" He choked. The room was empty. No Dudley, no clothes, no dirty magazines, and no bed. It was completely cleaned out, and looked like it had been for a long time.



“Bloody Hell!” Harry swore, borrowing Ron’s favorite phrase. He kicked open Petunia and Vernon’s door. Empty. More swearing. Cusses in Parseltongue. Punches raining down on the wall.

CREAK. Harry reigned in his moment of panic and winced at the small crack jutting down from where his hand had connected with the wall. “Great. Can my life ever be normal, or is that against the cosmic rules of the universe?”

Think, Harry, think. The Dursley’s are gone. The house is empty. Luna has vanished, and, if the voice mail is any indicator, a lot have things have changed in the last five minutes or so. Now, what can you do to improve this situation?

He closed his eyes and sank against the wall. His fingers trailed against the warm runes thrumming against his chest. Luna had said that the necklace would “bring him back”; did she mean she would fix whatever had caused everything to suddenly change? His head was reeling. Think Potter! This situation makes no sense at all, but surely someone must know what this is all about. Someone at Hogwarts would know. Like Dumbledore. Only Dumbledore was dead. And it was all his fault, no matter what Ron or Hermione said. He’s watched Snape murder him, and he’d been powerless to stop him.

“Not anymore,” he whispered to himself. “I’ll never let that happen again.” It was part of what drove him to the dueling, no matter how illegal. He never wanted to be that helpless boy ever again.

Taking a breath, Harry straightened. He needed to get a message to Hogwarts, and a chill down his spine told him that he wouldn’t find any of his belongings. He strode over to his ‘room’ and ripped open the door. It was barren and empty, housing a disgusting stale stench. Hedwig was gone, and so was everything else.

Running a hand through his dark, messy hair, he started pacing. He needed to get hold of an owl. Where would he get hold of an owl. “Diagon Alley.” He stopped. “Yes, they have an owlery. I can rent a room at the Leaky Cauldron until I can get a reply from them. That will work.” Quickly, he took stock of what he had: an invisibility cloak, low-

grade dragon-hide shirt and pants, a necklace, his wand, and his glasses. Harry grimaced. He didn't have anything to pay the Knightbus, and he certainly didn't want to use his celebrity status to get a free ride.

He wrapped the cloak around him, swallowing the guilty feeling. "Sneaking on it is then." With a sigh, he walked out into the sidewalk and held out his wand.

### Chapter Three

Harry pushed open the door to the leaky Cauldron, keeping his head down. He smoothed the bags slashing across his forehead and veiling his lightning scar, hoping it wouldn't attract the annoying amount of attention it usually did.

He slowly glided through the throng of people, his hand instinctively sliding to his wand as he felt their eyes clinging to him as he past. A gasp came from the woman standing ahead of him. A man he walked past halted dead in his tracks. At the corner of his eye, Harry could see Tom stop his lazy cleaning of the bar counter.

He glanced up briefly, steeling himself for an outburst of "It's Harry Potter!" Instead, her face was draining of color, her eyes wide. The expression in her eyes told him it wasn't because she was star struck.

She was afraid of him.

Harry swept his eyes across the room. They were all afraid of him. "He looks like him," a frantic whisper skittered somewhere behind him.

"No, no. He isn't. He's just a kid-"

"His eyes aren't his color-"

"He's wearing glasses-"

His heart thumping against his chest, Harry quickened his pace, ducking under the panicked gazes and ignoring the way voices died as he past their owners. Why were they all looking at him like that? Didn't they recognize him? Did the Prophet put something that bad in their latest slandering article?

Harry slipped into the back alley and rapped the familiar pattern on the wall. The bricks shifted with a groan, revealing Diagon Alley paved in front of him. He breathed a sigh of relief. At least one thing, he thought to himself as he took a step inside, is the sa- He froze. No.

The stores were blasted with a spray of scorch marks. Windows glistened with a golden streak of writing: "Iacio semita ut maiestas". The streets were suffocated in ash, with only a sparse pocket of people scuttling around. No one dared to look another person in the eye. Everything was unnaturally silent.

"What happened here?" he breathed. Cautiously, he walked forward, wincing as his boots crushed some unidentified object on the ground. "This place is about as cheerful as a graveyard..."

"Mommy!" Harry looked up; a curly haired boy about six years old was pointing at him excitedly. "Mommy, look! It's him! It's You-Know-"

"Quiet, honey!" The child's mother snatched his arm, her eyes wild as they locked with Harry's green ones. "Don't look at him!" she hissed, and if it weren't for his excellent hearing, he wouldn't have heard her. She frantically dragged the child away, ignoring his protests.

Harry's blood iced. Did that child just call him 'You-Know-Who'? Wait Potter, he calmed himself. He couldn't have meant that You-Know-Who we all know and love. He was about to smile to himself when another person rapidly steered away from him. Harry could feel the alarmed gazes flung at this back again.

Merlin, what's going on here? He tried to ignore them and tried to find an owlery. The professors or the Order would have answers. They would know what happened, and where he could find this morning's paper to read about it. Whatever Voldemort had done over the summer, it had been ridiculously effective.

He turned a corner to reach the owlery, annoyed at the golden Latin phrase strewn all over the walls like graffiti. Who knew Voldemort was into Latin propaganda? Diagon Alley looked like there had been a serious attack that no one in the Order thought he should know about. Once again.

He sighed and inched towards the door. "Hello?" he called. Out. An owl hooted from the back corner, but otherwise, there was no one there but two owls. "Hello?" No answer. Harry fished out a sickle from his pocket that he'd found on the way to the Leaky Cauldron. That

would pay for the use of the owl. He scoured the shop for a quill and parchment and jot down a quick letter.

Professor McGonagall,

Last night, there was an attack on Privet Drive. I don't know why or who did it, but I was forced to leave. I'm currently planning to stay at the Leaky Cauldron.

I have plenty of questions, but I'd prefer to ask them with you or one of the Order members face to face. Please let me know what the most convenient time for you is.

H.P

Well, he thought, it's not the best letter, but it will get the point across. Maybe she'll know about what this, he flicked the necklace pulsing against his chest, is. He rolled it up and tied it to the nearest owl's leg. It flew off, and Harry was about to leave, when he caught sight of a rolled up newspaper on the chair behind the counter. Perhaps this will have some answers. He picked it up and unraveled it, smoothing out the headline. He stopped breathing.

"You-Know-Who Strikes Again!" it shouted at him. Then, the subscript explained, "Malfoy and Nott Mansions Razed to the Ground. Son Catches Footage." What? Voldemort raided his own Inner Circles' – his eyes dropped down to the photograph below, and he felt his blood freeze over. On the left was a photograph of the ashes of Nott Manor, still fuming over the lawn. On the right obsidian-black cloaked figures blasted spells mercilessly at a pale white mansion. Fire roared from inside the halls, and two blonde figures, obviously stunned, were crumpled by the feet of a slender, aristocratic man. Harry squinted, cursing his bad prescription.

The man standing over them lazily tossed his wand in the air and caught it, reminding Harry of a seeker that didn't have a snitch around. Another hand trailed in the fur of a – Harry's eyes widened – a griffin. Harry tensed as the creature in the photo stalked around the fallen figures, but it did nothing but snort contemptuously and curl up beside its master. Was that man Voldemort?

“Couldn’t be,” he muttered to himself. “Voldemort has Nagini.” But he was obviously the leader. He was unmasked. And his careless posture as the Death Eaters tore up the mansion told him that no one was objecting to the fact that he was merely observing. Yet, although the supposed Voldemort was too far away in the background, Harry could swear that he didn’t have the snake-like features that still haunted his nightmares. And he was shorter than he remembered, younger.

For reasons he could not explain, the photograph chilled him to the bone. Brilliant, he scoffed at himself. Harry sighed, resolving to push it aside until he could withdraw money for the bank to pay for a room. Things certainly have changed in the past couple months. He walked out of the store until he could find Gringotts. With only a glance at it, he could tell that it was probably the only place that Voldemort had spared. Making sure to keep his head down again, he walked into reception area, trying to avoid the stares straying in his direction.

He walked up to a random goblin as swiftly as he could. He didn’t need frightened whispers or over-enthusiastic fans at the moment. “Hello,” he greeted. The goblin looked bored. Scowling, Harry was about to repeat himself, when the creature looked up. Only the slightest widening of the goblin’s eyes and his sudden tension gave any hint that he had recognized him.

“Yes?” the goblin answered stiffly. Harry had the alarming notion that he was calculating some way to alert security.

“I’d like to withdraw some money from my vault.”

“Key.”

“I don’t have it.” He quickly added, “But if you check my blood, you’ll see that I’m who I say I am.”

“And who, exactly,” the goblin leaned forward, “is that?”

Harry sighed and lowered his voice. “Harry James Potter.”

The goblin didn't even blink. "The Head of the House of Potter," he started brusquely, "has ordered that no one but Mrs. Hermione Weasley may withdraw funds from the Potter vault."

"No one'?" Harry echoed in outrage. Pause. Then, "Wait, did you just say 'Hermione Weasley'?" You have got to be kidding me..!

"Yes to both," the goblin snipped. "And unless Gringotts receives permission from Lord Potter, we cannot give you access to this vault, no matter what your relations are."

Harry felt a headache beginning to battle-ram against his skull. "Where," he mumbled, cradling his head in a hand, "and who is the current Lord Potter?" This is utterly ridiculous! I'm the last Potter left! And that could mean that Lord Potter – "Wait, I have a seat on the Wizengott?" he blurted unintelligently.

"No," the goblin almost snapped, "Lord Potter has a seat on the Wizengott! And since that seat is currently unclaimed and Lord Potter's whereabouts have been unknown since his last contact with us fifteen years ago, you cannot access this vault."

"You must be mistaken-"

"Gringotts does not make mistakes with one of its most esteemed patrons!"

Harry growled. "Alright then, what's the name of this Lord Potter?"

The goblin glowered. Harry almost thought he wasn't going to answer, but then he bit out curtly, "Harry James Potter. Senior," he amended, shooting Harry a distasteful look.

"There is no Harry James Potter senior!" Harry yelled a bit too loudly. Half the bank was staring at him, and this time out of annoyance.

"Sir, I have to ask you to leave." Harry didn't even dignify the goblin with a response. He stalked out of Gringotts cursing to himself.

No Lord Potter? What in blazes was happening here?! The last time I checked, I was very much alive, Harry winced. Although certain homicidal megalomaniacs would love to change that state of my health. And Hermione Weasley? Hermione Weasley? He still couldn't process that part. Impossible! They're not even of age yet! And there is no way they wouldn't tell me about this! In fact, how could any of these changes have occurred in such a short period of time? The goblin could be mistaken. Unlikely, considering the careful nature of goblins, but possible. But what about everything else? He still couldn't come up with an explanation for any of it.

Wait for the owl reply, he thought numbly. He stood out in the street and fingered the pockets of the pants he had underneath his invisibility cloak. Wonderful, Potter. You're broke. Life just flings more pleasant surprises out to you by the day, doesn't it? He threw on the hood of this cloak, activating the invisibility charms. If anyone cared that he had just vanished into thin air, no one made a comment. So much for staying at the Leaky Cauldron.

Miserably, he walked back to the pub anyway. Maybe he could convince someone there to let him work off the debt? It was only one night, after all.

A/N: Thanks to everyone who reviewed! I know, nothing much has happened in this chapter, but thanks for staying with me. Just a note about the generations of the characters here: it's going to be fairly arbitrary. I don't think I'll have much of a logical order to it.



## Chapter Four

Dumbledore was fishing through his endless supply of Lemon Drops, humming to himself. Fawkes, who was perched on his shoulder, gave a very un-Phoenix-like snort at this off key singing, and Dumbledore chuckled. It had been a week since Hogwarts had begun, and so far there were no attacks, kidnappings, or other unwholesome activities masterminded by the Dark Lord designed to harm his students. Or, rather, designed to harm one student in particular: the Boy Who Lived.

It was then that he heard the soft tinkling of the wards sound, alerting him that someone was coming up to his office. The headmaster patted Fawkes and sat up straighter, wondering which professor was coming to visit him at this hour of the night.

Professor McGonagall didn't even knock. The door flew open, and a mildly surprised Dumbledore adjusted his spectacles as the Transfiguration professor exclaimed, "Albus!"

"Yes, Minerva?" he regained his (in) famous tranquility.

"You wouldn't believe," she heaved, swiping a parchment from her robe pocket, "what I just had the misfortune of receiving!"

"Hmm," Dumbledore peered at the culprit that had upset the stern professor with interest. "Not another prank, is it?" Her silence made it obvious that it wasn't. Well, that was possibly one of the less than stellar attempts at lightening the mood he had made in his life. Dumbledore picked up the paper and cleared his throat.

"Professor McGonagall'," he began to read, and halted. The handwriting was hauntingly familiar, reminding him of a student he had both the fortune and misfortune of teaching at Hogwarts many years ago, before he had become the monster he was today. "Professor McGonagall'," he repeated. "Last night, there was an attack on Privet Drive..." Dumbledore dropped the letter.

McGonagall took the discarded letter and pointed at the letters signed at the bottom. "His initials are here: H.P. Albus, you don't think it might actually..?"

The headmaster said nothing. He read the letter again, fully this time. "He knows about the Order."

"We've already suspected that, though," McGonagall rushed.

"If this is a trick, the handwriting was forged perfectly. Whoever did this was clearly well informed. He or she even knew his original name; very few people are still alive to claim such knowledge."

"But why would he do this? Is he...feigning amnesia? Or at least partial amnesia?" She proclaimed the no one in particular, "That would be absurd! No one would be foolish enough to fall for such a poorly disguised deception!"

Dumbledore stroked his beard, deep in thought. "It is possible," he hypothesized, "that the magical surge I detected today has something to do with this situation. Harry has always enjoyed his...liberal experiments. Cornelius has sent Aurors to investigate the area where it occurred. In the meantime, however, Harry has claimed that he will be at the Leaky Cauldron."

"Albus, you don't mean to go after him, do you?" Minerva looked horrified. "This could be one of You-Know-Who's bizarre, unconventional traps! You do remember what happened in London, don't you?"

"I do Minerva, I do," Dumbledore replied. "But now is not the time for that. The Leaky Cauldron should be relatively safe. I, myself, shall go personally, along with an Order member, perhaps? Lemon Drop?"

"W-Wha-? No, no thank you," she returned briskly. "I will be going with you." She was an Order member, after all. "Are you sure you won't take to have more? We might need backup."

"We cannot risk the added attention it would cause. If he feels threatened, all the surrounding people will instantly become hostages." He pointed his wand to two Lemon Drops. "Portus." If this was a trap, they would have a quick means of escape. Nodding to Minerva, he held out one of the lemon drops to her. She pocketed it

while Dumbledore threw a tuft of Floo powder into the fireplace. The flames roared and writhed into an emerald green that reminded Dumbledore so much of the eyes of the student that had failed him. Or that I failed, the ancient wizard sighed. His fingers curled around his wand, he stepped into the embers. "The Leaky Cauldron!"

Warmth heated his skin, and then faded. Dumbledore stepped out, scanning the pub, already shifting into a dueling stance. Minerva appeared, her wand at the ready.

It was late, but even so, a few wizards were still nursing a batch of drinks. A couple looked up, their eyes widening in awe, while others smiled, recognizing their old school headmaster. Albus turned to the bar and rang the bell. "Coming!" Tom's voice called. He poked his head out. "Ah, Dumbledore," he smiled weakly. "Have you come for...the boy?"

Dumbledore felt himself tense. "I've come to see a Mr. Harry Potter, if that's what you're inquiring."

"Ah, yes, yes," the bartender mumbled. He swallowed. "He looks like him, Albus. I know, it's irrational, but he does."

Dumbledore smiled pleasantly, although a foreboding feeling in his stomach was beginning to spawn at an alarming rate. "Please, tell me what Mr. Potter's room number is."

"241."

"Thank you."

The headmaster and the Transfiguration professor turned and strode up the stairs to the second floor, checking the glinting letters. Finally, they stopped at the right door. McGonagall inhaled deeply, her mind already envisioning a garrison of Death Eaters armed behind the entrance. Pushing aside the thought, she gave a sharp rap on the door.

Quiet footsteps tapped against the floor; the door opened a crack. Emerald green eyes gazed down at her from behind a pair of glasses. Minerva froze at the sight.

“Professor!” he called out, a smile beginning on his face. He began to open the door the rest of the way. “Thanks for coming-” Abruptly his words died. He stared at Dumbledore as if he was seeing a ghost. No one moved. Then Harry whispered, “Professor Dumbledore?”

“Yes, Harry?” the headmaster replied in a mild tone almost bordering on coolness. He was rather startled that the boy didn’t snarl at the name.

Harry stepped forward. “But – but you’re dead!” He sputtered. “I saw – you died..!”

Dumbledore frowned. “I assure you, Mr. Potter, that I am very much alive, though no thanks to your efforts, I assume.” The boy stepped back as if he had been slapped.

“I tried,” was the weak protest, “but you Stunned me. You wouldn’t let me help you! Why didn’t you let me help you?!”

The Potter lookalike was starting to get angry. And if he was anything like the real Potter...“Calm down, Mr. Potter,” McGonagall interrupted instantly, “if that is indeed who you are. What do you want with us?”

This boy...he looked exactly like Harry James Potter. Frighteningly so. But he couldn’t be. The Dark Lord would never pull such an unbelievable stunt like this, no matter how unconventional his tactics. There was no point.

That we can see, she reminded herself. He must have some ulterior motive.

“Not...what do you mean?” the boy demanded. “I am Harry Potter. Who else would I be?”

“I don’t know what your reasons are for reversing your age and feigning amnesia, Harry.” Dumbledore deliberately used his old

student's first name again. Still, there was no violent reaction. It puzzled him. "However, I can tell you that neither the Aurors nor the Order will be amused by it. Or have you brainwashed an innocent victim into impersonating your younger self?" His thoughts were already flickering through the possibilities of who this boy could be. It certainly wasn't Harry. It couldn't be.

"What? No! Sir...no, you're dead! You-" The boy halted. "Death Eaters! This has to be a trick!" Now the two professors were beyond perplexed. But before they would ponder his words, the Potter lookalike had his wand aimed between them with a swiftness that made Minerva gasp and Dumbledore's eyes narrow in recognition. 'Harry' stepped back. "Did you honestly think you could fool me?" His dueling stance was almost perfect, and the almost served to annoy more than confuse. In those rather recent and vivid memories Dumbledore would rather forget, his stance was flawless.

Some would say it was an irrelevant element to note, that perhaps it was just made out of nervousness. But Albus was beginning to think that there may be more to this than met the eye.

"Harry-"

"No! I'm not going to listen to your lies!"

"Mr. Potter-"

"You," he ordered, jerking his wand at the transfiguration professor. "You say you're professor McGonagall?"

"Yes-"

"Then transform!" Harry snapped. "Do it, and I might just believe you!" Minerva took an involuntary step back. "Now." She glanced at Dumbledore, but not before the Potter lookalike saw the fear in her eyes and balked. In fact, he was so shocked that Albus managed to flick his fingers without him noticing, and a wandless Stunner propelled in the boy's direction.

Harry's eyes widened; he dodged with an almost surreal swiftness, but in the short range between the two wizards, it was useless. His body crumpled, and Albus caught it with a Levitation Charm before it met the floor. "Are you alright Minerva?" Albus asked as he stepped inside room 214. Even looking so young, it didn't change the fact that she had been threatened by...him.

"Yes, yes, I'm fine. Thank you." She looked pale. With the stories she'd heard and with what she had seen with her own eyes, she couldn't help but freeze at the boy's command - the boy who looked so much like Harry Potter.

Nodding, Albus gestured to the meager belongings in the room, which all packed themselves up at the silent command.

"What are you doing, Albus?"

"Taking him to Hogwarts. We can't talk to him in such a public area."

Her mouth opened in horror. "You can't be serious-!"

"I am very serious, Minerva," the headmaster replied. "I believe that there is more going on in our current situation than it appears. We must ascertain that truth, if it exists, before dismissing the possibility and turning him into the proper authorities."

Still appalled at the suggestion, she managed to say, "The Aurors, Albus? The proper authorities would never sentence him properly. He has too much support in the ministry – in the public!"

"Are you suggesting vigilantism?"

"Isn't the Order of the Phoenix a vigilante sect already?"

The older wizard shook his head. "If we take the law into our own hands, we will lose the support we already have, and mark us as no higher than Hadrian himself." Minerva shuddered visibly. "It is just a name, Minerva. It is no different than 'Albus', 'Tom', or-"

“Let us leave, Albus,” was the interruption. “Perhaps you can say his name without fear, but it will take me some time to do so.” Eyes twinkling, the headmaster made his way out of the room, Harry, his belongings, and Minerva in tow, for the fireplace.

Harry’s eyes snapped open. He shot to his feet, his hand already seizing his wand – which wasn’t there. “Salazar!” he cursed, flinging his gaze in every conceivable direction for an escape route.

Harry heard the figure’s robes gently brush against the floor before he spoke. “I must insist that you not use that language in front of me, Harry,” the mild voice reprimanded. “My sensibilities are quite delicate in my old age.” Dumbledore! It appeared that Harry was in the Hogwarts’ headmaster’s office.

Harry began to relax, but then stopped himself. The events of what appeared to be yesterday, judging from the sunlight streaming into the office, pummeled through his head. “You Stunned me!” Harry accused, whirling around. He scoured Dumbledore’s expression, his occlumency shields already thrown up, though if it really was Dumbledore, his shields were practically useless. “Why did you do that, and who are you, really?”

The alleged headmaster’s face had the slightest tint of thoughtfulness shrouding it.

Harry glared. “Answer me!” Not even the flicker of change. Harry felt a poisonous mixture of anger and fear roar inside him. “Tell the truth!”

Dumbledore’s eyes narrowed as he felt a slap of legilimency against his shields. The supposed Harry Potter flinched as if he regretted the words, but then straightened, glowering back at him. “Tell me, what do you hope to gain from this, Harry?” The boy waited, his arms crossed over his chest. “Did you lock away and then fabricate memories so that you appear to be telling the truth, or was it an alternative technique?”

“I’m not lying,” was the gritted out response. “And you’re really one to talk about ‘alternative techniques’! How did you bring him back? This couldn’t be an infernus.”

"I assure you, Harry, that I am quite myself."

"Prove it!"

"Of all the insolent-" Phineas Black scowled loudly from his portrait.

"Phineas." Dumbledore silenced him, still watching Harry. "How would you like me to do so?"

The boy was silent for a moment, then, "Fawkes. If you really are Dumbledore – which I know you aren't – you would have Fawkes with you." He tilted his chin up triumphantly as if daring him to contradict him.

Raising his eye brows, Dumbledore held out an arm. "Fawkes," he called. An orb of fire erupted on his outstretched arm, and then vanished. A fiery crimson and gold phoenix stood perched where the flames had just been.

Harry stepped back in shock. "W-What-?" Impossible, he thought furiously. It's Fawkes – but Fawkes left after Snape killed him! But – he wouldn't sit on this imposter's arm. No phoenix could sit on any Death Eater's arm. It's not in their nature. And Fawkes wouldn't sit on anyone's arm unless it was the true Dumbledore. But that's impossible! The word screeched in his mind deafeningly.

"As you can see, Harry, if I may call you that, at least until I know your true identity," Dumbledore interjected through his thoughts, "I am Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore. Now you, however-"

"But how?"

"Harry, why are you so convinced that I am deceased?"

"I saw you!"

"That you have told me already," Dumbledore answered simply.



Harry sank down on the sofa, staring at nothing in particular. Impossible...impossible...No, snap out of it, Potter! This is the magical world. Anything's possible. This is just...highly improbable. He paused in his mental rampage. Concentrate on the present. You're in the headmaster's office, with a man who, for all intents and purposes, is professor Dumbledore. Your wand is gone. So is your cloak. You're cut off from your trust fund. The Dursley's are...well, you have no idea what happened to them. And let's not forget: everyone thinks you have amnesia. "I don't know if...if this is something I should tell you," he began. Tell him. We'll see what side he's on by his reaction. Fawkes took off and settled himself on the sofa, peering curiously at Harry. The Gryffindor blinked before looking back at Dumbledore. "But yesterday, when I was back at Privet Drive, I was attacked."

"Yes," Dumbledore affirmed, still standing. It didn't escape Harry's notice that there wasn't a trace of the twinkle he had always thought Dumbledore had. "Or so your letter claimed." Had he done something wrong? He hadn't seen Dumbledore like this since the Goblet of Fire incident in Fourth Year.

Oh yes, the letter, Harry remembered. "Well, after that happened, I-" he swiftly tossed aside the idea of telling Dumbledore about the necklace "-everything changed." Luna had said it was his only way back, and he wasn't willing to give 'Dumbledore' his ticket out of here.

"Changed? How so?"

Harry bit down another one of the scowls he seemed to have in handfals today. "I mean, the house was empty. The Dursley's were gone. The house is for sale. Diagon Alley's a mess, the goblins' say that my vault's been closed, there's apparently," every syllable was drenched in sarcasm, "a Harry James Potter senior, and Hermione and Ron are married!" He jerked to his feet. "And not only that, but you and professor McGonagall are claiming that I'm lying and – and have amnesia, and everyone's giving me looks, like I've done something wrong!" A light weight settled on his shoulder. Harry glanced up in surprise, only to find Fawkes resting against him, his curved beak nuzzling Harry's already messy hair and causing it to riot. Harry grinned faintly; the phoenix trilled a soft song, the notes

instantly soothing him. The Boy Who Lived let out a sigh. "Thanks, Fawkes," he murmured. He stroked its wing, then wondered if what he was doing was impolite. Automatically, he turned to Dumbledore.

The headmaster was giving him an odd look that caused the question to die on his lips. It wasn't the fearful or shocked ones in the Alley, but it was unnerving nevertheless. It was assessing, and if Harry hadn't been the relatively accomplished occlumens that he was, he would have thought that Dumbledore was examining all his thoughts. His starkly blue eyes traveled to Harry's forehead, where his scar was.

Harry bristled. Dumbledore had never cared about this scar before. He squashed the instinct to smooth his bangs over his forehead, wondering what about the scar had captured the headmaster's attention.

"Harry," he finally began with a slowness that set Harry on edge, "tell me exactly how you regard me."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, do you like me? How do you see me? Are we enemies? Friends? Acquaintances, perhaps?"

Harry stared incredulously. "I'm the Boy Who Lived! Everyone, Death Eater or not, knows that Dumbledore is my guardian!"

The shock that the boy before him thought of him as a guardian figure was gone as soon as he repeated the title 'Boy Who Lived' to himself. Of all the ridiculous things to believe... "Your memories must have been altered. Severely," he stated. "Harry, you are..." No, it would be better not to say anything, just in case he did have amnesia. If that was the case, if he told him, Harry's memories might return. "You are not the Boy Who Lived."

"What the bloody Hell are you talking about?!"

"Language, Harry."

“Bollocks!” he yelled, jumping to his feet as the headmaster closed his eyes. “What do you call this?” He jabbed a finger at the lightning shaped scar Dumbledore had just been examining.

“I’m not quite sure what it means, but it is a perfect replica. I must applaud the artist.”

“This isn’t funny!”

“Indeed it is not.”

“What them,” he demanded snidely, “has Neville suddenly become the Boy Who Lived? The person who has to either murder or be murdered thanks to that bloody prophecy?” He ignored Dumbledore’s shock. “All those years of training, fighting for my life, and living with the bloody Dursley’s all been a big cosmic joke, have they? Well I’m not laughing!” He slammed his fist against the bookcase next to him, only to remember at the last minute how stupid that was. With a lurch, the bookcase and all its contents went flying across the room before he could even blink. The redwood splintered all over the floor and the books skydiving off the shelves came raining down like lightning bolts.

Harry ducked and swerved out of the way until Dumbledore cast a silent levitation charm, freezing the dive-bombing books in midair. “Sorry, professor,” Harry apologized out of habit. “I didn’t – I mean, it’s been happening like that all summer-” he stopped, remembering that the wizard in front of him could still be some sort of trick. What, he didn’t know, but it was a possibility and, in that case, he didn’t need to know about his unusual summer.

Dumbledore sat down behind his desk, steepling his fingers. “Curious,” he murmured, reminding Harry of the first day he received his wand. “Very curious.”

“Excuse me, sir-” Harry decided that if this was a hoax, it was too stupid to waste his time dignifying it with his anger “-but what is ‘curious’?”

After a moment Dumbledore turned to him, considering. Then, “How old are you, Harry?”

Evasion? Harry thought so. Again, this is too stupid to be worthy rolling my eyes over, Harry reminded himself. Either that, or something really strange has happened, and I have to just take it in stride. "I'll be turning seventeen in two weeks."

"Ah yes. That would make sense."

"What would make sense, sir?"

"All in time, Harry, all in time." Harry scowled, but the headmaster seemed to be watching closely for his reaction, so he said nothing more. "When were you born, Harry?"

"Merlin," Harry mumbled to himself in disbelief. He cleared his throat at Dumbledore's raised eyebrow and replied, "July 31st."

"And you don't think that it is rather strange that you are turning seventeen in two weeks, when it is already a week into classes?"

"What? That's not-" He stopped himself from saying 'impossible' again and sounding like a broken record.

"In any case, it's clear to me that you do not consciously intend harm and that your memories have somehow been corrupted."

"My memories are fine!"

"We will find out what has happened to you," Dumbledore went on. "In the mean time, I see no reason why you shouldn't continue your magical education. Do you agree?"

Harry just glared. "...I suppose." It's not like I can do anything else, but at least I'll have access to the library. Maybe that will tell me something, and maybe I can find Luna and ask what in the world is going on. "I can't be an Auror without the right amount of NEWTs." The headmaster coughed, but Harry had the sneaking suspicion that it was meant to cover some sort of ironic laughter. "Well, I guess I'll have to be sorted then."

"You will try the Hat on," the older wizard agreed, "but I've already decided your House. You will be in Slytherin."

"What?!" Harry half bellowed. "You've got to be joking! Slytherin?"

"Yes Harry, Slytherin. I know you mustn't approve, since you were in Gryffindor-"

"You're bloody right I don't approve!"

"Language, Har-"

"No, don't 'language' me!" Harry snapped. "I don't care if you're Dumbledore or not – I won't be in Slytherin. That's where Voldemort went, and all those bigots are!" The headmaster's eyes darkened alarmingly. "Look, I'm the Boy Who Lived – the Golden Boy. And I've hated all those titles, but they do have one thing right: I'm not supposed to be in Slytherin. The real Dumbledore wouldn't do something this stupid!"

Ah, a nasty voice in Harry's head retorted, but the Hat wanted to put you in Slytherin, didn't it?

Shut up, Harry deadpanned.

"Harry, I'm afraid that there is only one person I trust to be able to keep an eye on you in your rather unusual condition, and that person is a Slytherin. He is, consequently, Head Boy, but we can arrange to have you sleeping in the same common room as the Heads. It will be a...unique experience for you."

The proclaimed Golden Boy decided that he didn't like the way the headmaster said the word 'unique'. "Fine. Like I have a choice." Whatever. The Dumbledore imposter can say what he likes. I'll just ditch this so-called Head Boy as soon as possible. Shouldn't be hard, with my invisibility cloak and all. "Where's my stuff?"

"Your belongings are already in the Head commons. I will bring our Head Boy here and have him introduce you to your new lodgings. I

hope you don't mind if I leave you here for a moment, Harry? Your appearance might be a bit of a shock."

He smiled. "Am I that dirty, professor?" Dumbledore gave a half-hearted twitch of his lips, ignoring the joke. Why do I get the impression that he doesn't like me? Harry decided to just content himself with scowling at the cabinet in front of him.

Dumbledore left, leaving Harry to pace in silence. He wondered briefly if the doors would let him out if he wanted to, but didn't bother trying. He was certain they wouldn't.

He sighed and then frowned. Something didn't seem right about the cabinet...Wait, where's the Sword of Gryffindor? It was gone. For a moment he worried, but then remembered that he could always just pull it out of the Hat if he needed it. He'd become quite adept at sword fighting; all those fights had trained him immensely. But still, if he did need to escape, he'd rather not have to use something that could leave damage as irreparable as a sword.

And what was happening here, anyway? He wanted to believe it was an elaborate trick, but logic told him that Voldemort would have just captured and killed him with a quick and efficient Avada Kedavra. Wasting resources by creating newspapers, setting up Death Eaters, changing Diagon Alley, impersonating Dumbledore, and creating an entirely new Hogwarts wasn't his style. Was it really anyone's style?

An illusion, maybe? But his occlumency, while not stellar, would definitely detect something like this. Besides, it was already established in the Department of Mysteries incident that Voldemort wasn't exactly fond of being in his mind.

In other news, Dumbledore also seemed to know something about his increasing physical abilities, if his question about Harry's age was any indicator. If this was an illusion, which everything pointed against, all the characters in it would know the appropriate information. Honestly, Voldemort didn't believe that Dumbledore could possibly not know his age, didn't he? That was basic information! And obviously, since Dumbledore knew the prophecy, he would know

Harry's birthday – it was a vital part of the prediction! Not to mention Dumbledore claimed that Harry wasn't the Boy Who Lived...

Harry didn't exactly consider himself a Sherlock Holmes fan, but didn't the detective say something about after eliminating all possible options, the only remaining one, no matter how unlikely, had to be true? Well, he didn't have all the options laid out before him, but he did know this: he had to accept, or at least act until he could believe, that this new...reality was the real one now.

A/N: Hey everyone, hope you liked this chapter! I was wondering though, if you plan to review, if you could tell me what you thought about Harry's reaction? Did it seem realistic? Not angry enough, not surprised enough, etc? Maybe you could tell me whether you think Dumbledore would think of the "bad" Harry like he did in this chapter, or whether his reaction should have been sadder/colder/etc? Well, anyway, we'll finally be seeing Tom in the next chapter, which I hope I don't butcher...Thanks for your support!

## Chapter Five

Dumbledore made his way down to the Head common room, knowing that he would find his Head Boy there. Once he did, the whole situation with “Harry” would become a thousand times worse. He had already discarded several outlandish and eccentric theories, but he couldn’t settle on one that seemed right. For now, he was going to assume the worst case scenario: the boy currently waiting in his office was Harry James Potter, and that he had somehow altered his memories and used the Sorcerer’s Stone to put him back in the body of a seventeen year old for the purpose of a yet-to-be-seen dastardly scheme.

The headmaster winced at the memory of the Stone. If only Hadrian hadn’t gotten his hands on it, he might still be a formless ghost. He shoved the thought away and turned back to the immediate problem. If the boy wasn’t any of those things, he was at the very least related. The fast movements and unnatural strength were impossibly rare for anyone but Hadrian’s line...

“Harry, what are you thinking now?” Dumbledore whispered to himself. A clump of students spotted him and gasped. One dropped their books in astonishment. Another gaped without a shred of salvageable dignity. “Good afternoon,” he greeted, his eyes twinkling. The students were too stunned to do anything but stare. The headmaster sighed. Little by little, his walk to the common room was halting traffic in the halls. The professors would all have aneurysms within the next hour.

Pretending not to hear yet another onslaught of gasps that would probably vacuum the entire floor, Dumbledore stopped in front of the portrait of Artemisia Lufkin, the first woman to become Minister of Magic. “Cockatrice,” he stated the password. The middle aged witch smiled and opened the port hole. Climbing inside, the headmaster’s gaze found a tall, handsome boy pouring over a text book, his long-fingered hands sweeping a quill across his latest assignment. The boy frowned at his work, his slightly wavy auburn hair glinting in the afternoon light. “Tom, I hope I’m not disturbing you?”



Deep blue eyes snapped up at him. "Professor Dumbledore!" He swiftly stood, smoothing down his Slytherin robes. "Is there something I can help with, sir?"

"Yes, actually. Something rather serious." Dumbledore glanced around the elegant gold and green common room. "I see you and Miss Black have compromised on the decorations. The passwords too, I presume?"

"Of course sir," Tom answered with a mild grimace that, despite all sense, managed to appear charming. "I choose the passwords every first week, and Bla - Jasmine every second." Ridiculous Gryffidor, he scowled to himself. Must you insist on such asinine passwords? "Were you looking for her, headmaster?"

"No Tom. I'm afraid I've come to you on a matter that is of utmost importance. Miss Black will not be returning soon?"

"No sir. She is-" snogging Lupin in some spider-riddled broom closet "- otherwise occupied."

"Very well then. Please, sit down," Dumbledore gestured to the seat he had previously been studying in while Conjuring an armchair for himself. "First, you must promise me that this information will not leave this room in any manner, under any circumstances, for any reason."

Tom was briefly alarmed before settling back into his usual polished poise. "You have my word."

"Then I will be blunt. Harry Potter is currently pacing in my office as of five minutes ago."

Silence. Then, "Excuse me?" He practically choked on the words. "You – you can't be serious!"

"I'm afraid, my boy, that I am very serious," was the solemn reply. "He sent us a rather intriguing letter a few days ago, which we received today. Professor McGonagall and I retrieved him. The situation is rather-"

"Absurd!" he gasped, temporarily forgetting his manners. "This is – ludicrous! How –? Why –? No, it doesn't matter." He paled. "Headmaster, I fear that I'm not ready to complete the prophecy–"

A wrinkled hand quieted him. "Tom, I did not say that Lord Hadrian is currently pacing in my office. I said that Harry Potter is pacing in my office."

"The Dark Lord is sitting in your office?! What was he doing, having tea and crumpets?" He laughed somewhat hysterically. By my ancestors, this can't be happening! No, get a hold of yourself Riddle! You're acting completely unbecoming!

"Tom, I reiterate, Harry Potter is in my office right now, not the Dark Lord. I do not know what happened exactly, but he is currently almost seventeen years old. His memories are completely different – irrational, almost. He seems to believe that he is the Boy Who Lived."

"Oh that's a laugh," the Head Boy ground out, his knuckles clenching until they paled to a ghostly white. "Irony, really. But...but why are we still here? I have to kill him, quickly. Does he have..?" He trailed off uncertainly. If he hadn't come into his Gryffindor inheritance yet, he might have a chance to vanquish him!

"It hasn't completely manifested," came the explanation, "but it was enough to toss my bookcase across the room like a quaffle."

"Still has an impulsive temper, does he?" Tom could help but observe rather darkly.

"I have judged him relatively harmless." Tom drowned him in an incredulous look. "He possesses no ill intentions and is just as confused about this situation as I am. As a result, I've asked him to enroll in Hogwarts. He shall be in Slytherin House."

The disbelieving Slytherin could barely breathe. "H-headmaster...you aren't serious! Think of the danger he could pose! How many supporters he has! The entire Gryffindor House-!"

"I am well aware of how popular Hadrian is. However, Harry has no memory of his deeds-" Tom scoffed something inaudible "-and, as he is under the delusion that he is the Boy Who Lived, is concerned with doing everything he can to be a true Gryffindor."

"He," Tom hissed, "murdered my relatives! My uncle – my grandfather!"

"Hadrian did. Harry did not."

"They are the same people!"

"I'm afraid, as of yet, they are not. We must give Harry a chance. Perhaps he will see the error of his ways and aid us."

"I highly doubt it, headmaster."

"Then, at the very least, think of this as an opportunity." Tom smiled blandly. He was well aware that the headmaster was appealing to his Slytherin side. "Find his weaknesses. Learn how he thinks and how to predict him. It's an unprecedented occasion. Reap all the benefits you can."

"I...suppose it could have its merits," he admitted reluctantly. "But can I not warn anyone? Not even my most trustworthy friends?"

"I'm afraid that Miss Bellatrix Black and Mr. Malfoy will have to be left in the dark, my boy. I don't want Harry attacked for something he hasn't done."

"Yet," Tom muttered under his breath.

"Try not to have that attitude, Tom." Dumbledore pinched the bridge of his crooked nose. "I realize that the two of them both have personal experiences with Hadrian, but you must not tell anyone. You will be the only one who knows his identity and, as the Boy Who Lived, I have complete trust in your ability to handle Harry. It goes without saying that you should do all in your power to have him unaware of his identity until the time is right." He looked pointedly at him.

He wanted to yell, to refuse, to throw a tantrum. But instead, he schooled his features into an impassive mask and gave a curt nod. "Yes, headmaster." He forced himself to say the next words. He was rubbish at Divination, but that didn't mean he couldn't tell where this was going. "Where will he be staying?"

"He will be sharing your room." Dread churned in Tom's stomach. He was going to share his Head Boy room with that...that murderer? He would have to wake up every day and see that monster's face? As if the future Dark Lord wouldn't slaughter him in his sleep..."I see. Are we...are we to see him now?"

"Yes." Dumbledore stood, his garishly starred violet robes causing Tom to balk for a moment, before leading the way to the headmaster's office.

Learn, Tom coached himself, his hand already gripping his yew wand. Be perfectly calm and collected. You can do this. He's just a teenager now, with just as much experience as you. You'll be on par, if not better. You've been said to be one of the brightest of your age! You can do this. All his thoughts fled from his mind the moment Dumbledore opened the double doors into his office.

A slender, lean boy lounged with careless grace against the headmaster's maroon sofa. His astonishingly emerald eyes were focused intently in front of him, a sure sign that he was opting to ignore their entrance. His features held an aristocratic beauty, and his messy raven hair was lightly tousled, as if he had been playing quidditch just minutes ago.

The startlingly green eyes turned emotionlessly to the two of them. The boy lost all composure. "Tom Riddle?!"

Tom was startled. "How do you know my name?" he demanded.

"How do I know your name? How do I know your name?" the boy seethed, on his feet in an instant. "You murdered my parents!"

"Harry," Dumbledore tried to intervene.

"Don't you tell me to be calm! By Morgana," he vowed, "I swear, Riddle, I will-"

"Do what Potter? Kill me?" came the mocking reply. "I believe you've already promised that."

"Shut up you snake!"

"Shut up'? Why, how creative of you! I can't imagine where you might have thought of that insult."

"You've got ten seconds to find a good hiding place, Riddle, before I come seeking-"

"Silence!" Dumbledore boomed. The two boys' insults died on their lips before:

"But professor-"

"Headmaster-"

"Silence!" he repeated, the twinkle gone from his eyes. "Harry, how do you know Tom?"

"What do you mean 'how do I know him'?" Harry cried. "He's Lord Voldemort. Of course I know him!" Tom's soft gasp was lost on the headmaster, but not on Harry's enhanced hearing. "See? You recognize the name! You slimy-"

"Harry." Reluctantly, the boy stopped, deciding to stab Tom with a glare instead. "I see that these memories of yours still have key characters in your life in the cast. No matter, I must ask that you put aside whoever you think Mr. Riddle is, and try to start fresh."

"Fat chance!"

Tom stared. Was this really the Dark Lord, acting like a teenager, for goodness sake? It was unbelievable...and slightly humorous. The

Dark Lord thrust an accusing finger at the headmaster. Tom glowered at the disrespect.

"With all due respect, headmaster," Harry growled, "Riddle is a murderer!"

"And isn't that just the kettle calling the-"

"Mr. Riddle. Please." Dumbledore looked at the two fuming boys, who he would wager were moments from ripping each other to shreds. "I realize that the two of you have some rather unfortunate history together. However, in order for this to work, I need the two of you to cooperate."

Harry clapped sardonically. "And the Understatement of the Year Award goes to..."

"Must you be so insulting?" Tom snapped. "And why on earth are you wearing glasses? Your eyes are perfectly fine!"

"What are you," Harry retorted, "my doctor? I think I'd know whether I'd need glasses or not!"

"Boys..." Dumbledore briefly contemplated giving up before setting aside that option.

"My apologies, headmaster," Tom said stiffly. Harry rolled his eyes and crossed his arms across his chest.

"We have similar goals. All of us want to discover the true reasons for Harry's memory alteration – yes, I know, Mr. Potter, you believe that we are mistaken, not yourself – and generally why he is here. Humor us, Mr. Potter. Now, Mr. Riddle, you are Head Boy. It is your duty to take care of students and, since you are uniquely suited to Harry's presence, you will be able to keep him out of trouble."

"Professor, I would be fine with having a spy stalk me as long as it isn't Riddle."

"I'm afraid, Harry, that it must be Mr. Riddle. There will be no objections," he quickly added as Harry opened his mouth to do just that. "You will be in Slytherin House. I will personally research your predicament and inform you of all findings. You will act like a normal student and sit next to Mr. Riddle in all his classes. I trust that you won't be pranking your fellow Slytherins as violently as Mr. Potter senior did?"

"Yes professor."

"Mr. Riddle?"

"...Yes. Headmaster."

"Excellent. Now, Harry, please place the Sorting Hat over your head."

Harry frowned. "What for, we already know I'm going into Slytherin?"

"Humor an old man, Harry."

Without a word, the dark haired boy crossed over to the Sorting Hat's resting place and plucked it off. He jammed it over his head and sat down. It was clear that Dumbledore didn't trust him, and was using the Hat as an excuse to sift through his mind without using his own legilimency.

"Hmm? A student, at this time of the year?" the Hat wondered out loud.

"Yes. I need you to tell me what you think of Mr. Potter here. I'm not asking you to violate your confidentiality, but I would like to know whether you think the boy could...do well at Hogwarts."

"As you wish Albus. Let's see now...Mr. Potter? Heavens, how is it possible that you're back? I sorted you years ago!" Under the rim of the Hat, Harry's eyes widened at the declaration. "Ah, no matter. This will be much like your old sorting, for sure. Bravery and talent. A willingness for great self-sacrifice; most admirable. An even sharper mind than I remember. Oh dear, you have lead a hard life." Harry tensed. Surely the Hat wouldn't tell them – especially Riddle – about

the Dursleys, would it? “No, Mr. Potter. It’s all part of confidentiality. But yes, a thirst to prove yourself, and resourcefulness. I see that life has certainly made you a cunning sort.” Oh no. “And what’s this? A Parse-”

“Professor!” Harry all but shouted, yanking the Hat off his head. “Are we done yet?”

Dumbledore was looking at him curiously. Harry ignored Riddle, but he was certain that the snake was both glaring and dissecting him at the same time. “Almost, Harry.” He addressed the Hat, “Would you consider Mr. Potter here a trustworthy individual?”

“Certainly Albus, certainly,” the Hat beamed, recovering from the rude interruption. “He would do well in-”

“Professor, I’m eager to get started,” Harry yelled over the Hat’s proclamation of “Slytherin”. Damn. History repeats itself. At least I can be sure neither of them heard, if their expressions are any indicator...right?

“There’s no shame in that House, my boy,” the Hat grumbled. “I see your view of it hasn’t changed since your last Sortings. A most curious memory you have.”

“Thank you,” Dumbledore said to the Hat, putting it away. “Now then, why don’t you show Harry to dinner, Tom? I’m sure the rest of the Slytherins will be delighted to have a new member. But first, we must come up with a new name for you, Harry.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “What’s wrong with my name?”

“It’s rather recognizable,” Dumbledore dished out a feast of half-truths. “Since you don’t have the memories of the Harry we know, it will also be troublesome.”

He ran a hand through his raven hair. “Alright. How about Hadrian-”

“No!” The two of them objected instantly.



Harry eyed them suspiciously. "Okay...How about Evander? Evander Harrison James."

"That will be acceptable," Tom answered coolly.

He received a glare in return. Conceited prick.

Dumbledore advised, "Let us prepare a brief life story, as close to the truth as possible. Harry, do you speak any foreign languages?"

"I took Spanish in elementary school. I don't know a lot of it though."

"It will be enough. Not many people know Spanish in Hogwarts, so you will be safe if anyone calls you on it. We will say that you were educated in Spain, that you live with your aunt and uncle, and that you recently moved to England."

"Sounds good."

"Alright then, I'll leave you two to make final arrangements. I'll meet you both down at the Great Hall. I hear there will be some specially made pumpkin pies for tonight. Wonderful, wouldn't you say?" His eyes twinkling in the usual way, Dumbledore headed out of the office humming. The two arch nemeses were left facing each other in the middle of the room, Harry for the second time that day.

Tom and Harry stared at each other, both sizing the other up.

Harry, despite his amazing growth over the summer, was still three inches shorter than Riddle. But he's a giant, he sniped. I'm still going to be taller than practically everyone in the seventh year. Wonder what Ron and Hermione will say...if they're here.

Impudent, Tom summarized distastefully. That's what he is. An impudent Gryffindor.

A teacher's pet for sure, just like the pensive said. I bet he even asks the teachers to keep a cage for him in their class rooms.

Would it be such an agony for him to brush his hair? He could house an entire nest of Nifflers in there.

Stuffy bigot.

Brash hothead.

Harry stuck out his hand. Riddle eyeballed it. Merlin, how he hated that boy. Loathing himself, he accepted the handshake with all the joy of a person rinsing their arm with acid. Harry shook it. Hard.

“Ahh!” Riddle cried, wrenching his hand out of Harry’s death grip. “Very mature, Potter! Very mature!” He stared at the red impression printed on his hand before forcing himself to ignore the painful throbbing. Harry smiled thinly.

“Just so you know how this is going to go Riddle. Just so you know.”

“No, I’ll tell you how this is going to go,” Tom seethed. “I don’t care what the headmaster says – you are going to be on your best behavior. You are also going to treat my friends-” Harry raised his eyebrows “-with the utmost respect and care. You will obey the rules, and you won’t be making this anymore unbearable than it already is.”

“First off,” Harry held a finger up in the air, “who do you think you are, my uncle? I’ll behave just fine if you behave just fine. Second off,” he put up another finger, “you don’t have friends. You have thugs and brainless minions. And third? You’re one to talk about breaking rules!” Chamber of Secrets, anyone?

Tom mocked, “First off, I don’t believe you for a moment. You’ll be a fiend no matter how well you are treated. Second off, I don’t care what you think about the intellectual levels of my friends. You will treat them well. And third? I’m Head Boy. If I break rules, it’s well within my right.”

Harry laughed. Tom crossed his arms, waiting. Finally, Harry stipulated, “Look Riddle. I hate you. You hate me. We’re one big happy family. Now-”

“Barney, Potter?”

“Shut up. You obviously get the reference. What does that say about you? Anyway, like I said, we despise each other. I would willingly throw myself in Azkaban if it meant I wouldn’t have to share the same breathing space as you. But obviously, neither of us have that luxury. So I’ll tell you now that I won’t try to make your life any more miserable than it already is, but I won’t go out of my way to make it paradise either. Agreed?”

“Agreed.”

Strained silence. More glaring. Tom turned on his heel and left. Harry caught up to him. The trip to the Great Hall was sure to be as friendly as the Dursley household.

A/N: Alright, I'm sure a bunch of you are going to tell me that the timeline is weird (or you have a sneaking suspicion that it will be), so I'll just say that I agree with you. Still, I couldn't really picture it in another way...but I suppose I'll explain myself in the next chapter? Oh, and in case anyone was curious, yes, Jasmine Black is an OC. But don't worry, OC's won't be bombarding this story, lol. Any comments on Riddle and Harry's meeting? Not violent enough, too confrontational, etc?

## Chapter Six

Harry turned the invisibility cloak still slung over his shoulders inside out. The inside was black instead of the liquid silver of the outside, giving him a better way of blending in. He'd already earned a few stares with his clothing, which weren't the Hogwarts robes.

Both Riddle and he were locked in a competition of who could ignore the other the longest. However, since Harry was completely ignoring his left side, and Riddle was completely ignoring everything on his right, it was difficult to turn corners and greet anyone who happened to be in their arch rival's general direction. From what Harry had noticed, though, he didn't see many familiar faces. This just gets better and better, doesn't it?

Tom locked his gaze stonily ahead, cursing Potter, and Gryffindors in general, as he walked. Whatever the Dark Lord's scheme was with his insultingly bizarre façade, he would discover it. He would outsmart Lord Hadrian/Potter – especially now, when he was 'just another' seventh year student. After all, wasn't Tom said to be the most promising wizard of his age, Boy Who Lived or not? Well then, he –

"Tom!" an annoyed voice called. "Tom!" Tom froze, recognizing the owner. Potter froze as well. A girl's slim hand grasped his shoulder and whirled him around to face her. She glared at him, a scowl twisting her lips. "Ignoring me, are we, Riddle?" She punched his arm.

"Ahh!" Tom massaged his new wound. "Bellatrix!"

"That," she grinned victoriously, "is for forgetting to greet me." She laughed, her dark ringle's glistening in the sunlight. Then her eyes jumped to the boy standing beside her. "Oh, I apologize. I don't believe we've met. My name is Bellatrix-"

"Lestrangle!" Potter practically snarled.

If he hadn't been too stunned at Bellatrix's sudden materialization, he would have cringed. Someone, Tom thought, needed to work on his manners.

Potter's hand snatched at what would have been his wand, if Dumbledore hadn't put it in the Head commons.

Bellatrix sighed dramatically. "Has everyone heard about that already? Really, it's not a sure thing! I have all year to ensnare some other lucky wizard to satisfy mother. I don't suppose," she looked Potter up and down suggestively, "you're a pureblood, are you?"

Potter appeared to be promising all sorts of creative and unpleasant deaths for her, judging by the way he was glowering. While exercising the imagination was something he supported, Tom somehow doubted that all of that was having a positive effect on Potter's health.

He decided to intervene. Quickly. "No, Bella. He's just a poor half-blood like I am."

"Shame. He's not too hard on the eyes."

Merlin, the Head Boy was amazed, Potter looks as if he's either going to throttle her, or burst a blood vessel. Pause. Hopefully it will be the latter. All my problems will be solved in one go. But he decided not to test fate. Instead, he cleared his throat and decided to block the enraged boy before he lunged at one of his closest friends. "This is Evander," Tom stressed, hoping that Potter would get the hint, "James. He just arrived in England from Spain. He will be a seventh year Slytherin with us."

"A pleasure to meet you, Evander."

Harry barely registered that she said was still talking. Flashes of the Veil and Sirius's stunned expression as he fell backwards shrieked through his mind. Sirius, his godfather, and practically his adopted father, had goaded her...and then:

A red flash of light. His silver eyes widening in surprise. A whisper of his cloak. And then he was gone.

You have to mean it. Crazy laughter.

A hand on his shoulder jerked him out of the memories. "Are you feeling well, P – Evander?" Riddle seemed disgusted at the fact that he had to ask. "You seem a little...overwhelmed." Harry turned his death glare on him. No doubt Riddle was mocking him in the most discreet way he could think of.

"He's just never seen a pretty lady like me before," Lestrangle joked. "By the way, Tom..." Riddle threw Harry's arm away as if it was the plague. "I was hoping that maybe you could help me with my Transfiguration essay tonight." Her voice had become slightly softer. She bit her lip. Harry's eyes narrowed. With the way Lestrangle worshipped Voldemort, he highly doubted that she would suddenly be shy around him, of all things, and she didn't strike him as the type that had to beat down their pride to ask for help in school work. She probably begged him daily to let her lick the dirt on his robes off. Argh.

"Transfiguration?" Riddle repeated, running a hand through his auburn hair. "You're brilliant at Transfiguration. Why would you need me to help you with that?"

"You're better than I am," she replied almost immediately. "And I – well, I..." She glanced down at his hands, but Riddle was too busy trying to kill Harry with a single glance to notice. Harry, who was, unfortunately for Riddle, still alive, was astounded to hear her suck in a deep breath. She grabbed his wrists and pleaded, "Please?" Aborting his failed attempt at murder, the Head Boy frowned. "Come on, Riddle! Give a girl a break here!"

Something occurred to Harry. He clapped a hand over his mouth and doubled over. He could swear that he heard his ribs creaking with the effort not to laugh, whether from horror or humor, he couldn't tell. I mustn't say anything, I mustn't say anything.

"Evander," Riddle warned, though when Harry blinked up at him, he saw that he looked mildly confused. Harry still couldn't risk withdrawing his hand though. Scowling, Riddle inquired in would-be politeness, "Are you suffering from an allergy attack?" Harry just nodded, which only served to cause Riddle's frown to deepen.

Bellatrix gave a weak smile. She looked between the two of them, and then exclaimed, "Oh! Are you two related?"

Harry's 'allergies' were murdered on the spot. "No!" Both boys denied louder than was necessary.

"...I was just wondering. The two of you do look rather similar-"

"We do not!"

"Don't be absurd!"

Bellatrix held up her hands in a gesture of peace. "Alright, alright! I didn't realize that this was such a sore issue. So," she changed subjects. It was rather obvious, but it got the job done. "Why don't we all go to the Great Hall? Right after Tom agrees to help me with my essay, that is."

Tom sighed. "Very well. I don't see why you can't ask Andy to help you, though."

"You're the top in our year! Why else would I ask you?"

Tom decided that he didn't like the look Potter was giving him as she said that. "Bella, we'll catch up with you. I just need to talk to Evander for a moment."

"Oh." Harry noticed that Lestrangle's smile fell slightly. "Alright. See you later then." He watched her go, still giving Riddle an incredulous look.

"Alright Potter," Riddle rounded on him. "You don't get allergies, so why were you laughing? Deciding to introduce the world to your bad manners already, are we? And stop looking at me like that! If you have something to say, be an annoying Gryffindor and say it!"

If anything, Harry felt his incredulity kick up a notch, suffocating any anger he felt at the words. "You're telling me that Tom Riddle, Head Boy, prefect, Special Service Award winner, Heir of Slytherin, and

let's not forget Lord Voldemort, has no idea?"

"No, I don't. Enlighten me."

"And I thought Ron was blind," he muttered to himself. "And how would you know my medical status, anyway?"

"...You're changing the subject."

"Congratulations, Sherlock! Another case solved. Now let's go eat." He marched towards the Hall and Riddle had little choice but to follow. Shoving aside certain unpleasant suspicions from the conversation he had the misfortune of hearing, Harry seized the immediate problem nagging him much like Hermione would do about him and studying. I can't believe Dumbledore took my wand! Though I guess it would look suspicious if I pointed a wand at Lestrage the moment I met her. Argh. I better remember not to do anything like that again, especially since, if Lestrage is here, then that could mean that other Death Eaters are, too. He wasn't looking forward to it.

Trying not to tense, Harry slowed at the sight of the open double doors. The four tables were lined up just how he remembered, with Slytherin at one and Gryffindor at the other. He scanned the faces at his old House table. There were a couple of familiar faces, but only of people he had barely ever talked to. Blast.

"Let's go, Potter," Riddle instructed unnecessarily, striding past him. Harry made it a point to walk at his side. He wasn't going to follow like some lost sheep, especially someone like Riddle. The two stepped down the stairs into the Great Hall and headed to the snakes' table. Harry's fingers itched for his wand.

Hundreds of pairs of eyes trailed after him as he walked, the stranger not in Hogwarts robes. It was almost normal. Slytherins glanced at the two of them as they approached. Most of them gave Riddle inclinations of their heads or the tiniest smiles in welcome, while looking at Harry with an unspoken question.

"Tom," a smooth voice greeted.



"Lucius," Riddle smiled. He sat down next to him in what Harry was certain was his specially reserved seat. Reluctantly, he made a space for Harry. "This is Evander James. He recently moved here from Spain."

"Hello again, Evander," Lestranger smiled at him.

"Hi," he ordered his lips to form the words. Then something from his nightmares occurred. Lucius Malfoy, after briefly skimming his face with an impassive expression, extended his hand to him.

"Lucius Malfoy. It's a pleasure to meet you, Evander James." Apparently, he'd passed some sort of worthiness test.

Drat.

Harry half prayed that the powers-that-be would strike him down before he was obliged to shake the Death Eater's hand. A second passed.

Oh well. Seemed like there wouldn't be any divine intervention after all.

Fighting his body the entire way, he grasped Malfoy's hand. "The pleasure," the words seared his throat, "is all mine." Beside him, Riddle relaxed almost unnoticeably. The two dropped hands quickly enough that Harry wasn't sure who did it first. He was pretty sure that 'James' wasn't a wizard surname. It seemed that Malfoy, while not as prejudiced against Muggleborns or half-bloods, still had his issues. Harry was still amazed that the Death Eater acknowledged his existence in the first place.

Footsteps raced behind the Slytherin table. "Hey Tommy," a dirty-blond boy slapped Riddle on the back and swung into a seat next to Harry. The Slytherins nearby scowled as he nudged them to the side to make a spot to sit in. "What's up?"

Malfoy wrinkled his patrician nose. "Antonin, must you use such...common language?"

"Sure do, Lucy," he emphasized. Malfoy's pale cheeks colored. Coincidentally, Harry felt Riddle glance briefly at Harry, as if hoping that he hadn't heard 'Antonin' mutilate his name like that. "So, what's cracking?"

Bell – Lestrangle gave a delicate snort. "Antonin just returned from the United States a few weeks ago. He's been conversing like a hoodlum ever since," she explained to Harry.

"I told you never to call me 'Lucy'! It's undignified."

"How about 'Luscious'?" He winked. "I heard that's what Cissy's been calling you lately, Lucy."

Malfoy, Harry watched in wonder, makes stuttering look like an art.

"So, Four Eyes, what's your name?" Antonin peered up at him.

"Um...it's Evander. Evander James." Antonin reached out and shook Harry's hand before he could even recoil. Or save himself from the potential Death Eater by running to the other side of the room.

"Enchanted, James, enchanted. The name's Andy Dolohov. Don't ever call me Antonin though. Lucy's got it coming to him, you just watch."

Harry was too stunned to answer. Dolohov...don't tell me...

"Well, I've got to get moving y'all-" Malfoy groaned, muttering something about how Dolohov was just simply butchering the pureblood image every time he opened his mouth "-so I'll see ya' alive and well in History of Magic tomorrow! Well, I don't know about you, Evander," he grinned at Harry. "Binns' droning might just kill you half way through the lesson. It's probably his intent. Being with Myrtle still makes him a lonely man." He slapped Harry's shoulder, pilfered a cinnamon bun, and tore out of the Hall.

Harry began slowly, "Did that just really happen?"

"Unfortunately," Malfoy muttered, stabbing his steak with a bit too much vigor.

"It's not that bad, Malfoy," Bellatrix remarked. "After all, half of it was probably because of the sugar. We'll get our revenge when he starts having withdrawals in the common room again. It never fails."

Tom cleared his throat. "Might I introduce you to Walden McNair, Augustus Rookwood and...where is Severus? Well, never mind. He's probably in the library. We'll see him eventually."

"Snape?"

"You know him?"

"...I might." Harry tried not to scream. Merlin, Morgana, Salazar, Rowena, Helga, and Godric! I'm eating dinner with the entire Inner Circle!

"Tom said that you were from Spain, Evander?" Pause. "Evander?"

"Huh? I mean, yes?" Harry tore himself away from his eminent mental break down and looked at Malfoy.

The silvery-blond arched an immaculate eyebrow. "I believe that Avery is gorging on the paella a few people down. Would you like me to retrieve it for you?"

Harry pretended to know what a paella was. He guessed that it was some Spanish dish. Hopefully, it wasn't something that would kill him. "Yes, please." He glanced at Riddle and muttered, "Doesn't Avery have a first name?" It was just plain odd that even at 'school' the Death Eater was referred to by his last name.

"Yes," came the admission, "but he finds it rather embarrassing. Everyone just calls him Avery."

"Oh."

“So Evander,” Lestrangle started, “have you seen much of Hogwarts yet?”

Harry caught himself before he could smile. She was trying to engage him in conversation. He thought it would have been nice, if it weren't for the fact that this was Voldemort's Inner Circle. Why were they being, at the very least, polite, anyway? He was sure that 'James' wasn't a wizard family name...or was it? Maybe that explained they accepted him so easily, though Lestrangle seemed to accept his half-blood status without much complaint. Still, he should probably ask Riddle once they were alone.

“A bit of it,” Harry invented. “It's a lot larger than the school I went to in Spain.”

“How is the Academy at this time of year?”

Harry was saved from answering the question because at that moment Dumbledore stood, tapping his glass to get everyone's attention. Unfortunately, he had it under the Sonorous Charm. The high pitched notes squealed in Harry's ears.

“Aah,” he groaned, slapping his hands over his ears. The sound! His eyes rang painfully. Riddle stared at his new, unwelcome charge, who was gritting his teeth and scrunching his eyes shut. The rest of the table looked at Harry strangely.

The headmaster seemed to realize that he was making Harry look just slightly barmy. He stopped the tapping and shut off the charm. Harry let out a sigh of relief and sat up. “I have one announcement to make before we continue eating,” he said once he had everyone's attention. “We have a new student in Slytherin this year, Mr. Evander James. Seventh years, especially, I ask you to take good care of him.” He looked pointedly at the Gryffindors. Tom almost laughed at the irony. The Dark Lord practically idolized by the lions would be suffering at their hands because he was now in Slytherin. “Let us give a warm welcome to him now.”

Potter winced, looking as if he wanted to hide. Tom, feeling particularly malicious, suggested as sweetly as poison, “Why don’t you stand, Evander?”

Harry refrained from strangulating him and stood just as the Great Hall started clapping. Argh. It was like first year all over again.

Once the clapping subsided, he sat down, continuing with the small talk. All his senses were on alert. It was stupid of him to expect some sort of attack right now, but he couldn’t help it. Old habits die hard.

The Slytherins, true to their pureblood upbringing, ate like royalty. Riddle, Harry was slightly surprised to note, did as well. Must be the rest of them rubbing off on him, unless the orphanage was into immaculate manners at this level. At least he wouldn’t have to endure someone talking with their mouthful, like Ron.

Ron. Harry’s face fell. Where were his friends? From what the goblins said, they were alive – and married. He shuddered, pushing those frightening images from his mind. Well, at the very least, he knew they were friends with Harry Potter senior, whoever that was. Merlin, this new world was messed up. In fact –

BOOM! A miniature explosion blasted the far end of the Slytherin table. Burgundy mist unfurled like tendrils over the table. Harry craned his neck to see what was happening. Suddenly everyone in the Hufflepuff and Gryffindor tables erupted in laughter. Even the more detached Ravenclaws were chuckling. The Slytherins stared stonily ahead, not making a sound.

One of their own was sitting at the far end of the table. His now ridiculously bushy hair was ravaged by gold and red stripes. A lion’s mane poured from his jaw, and whiskers sprouted from around his cheeks. His hands were paws the size of dinner plates.

“The Weasleys.” Malfoy voice was ice.

“Not to mention,” Bellatrix glared, “Lupin and – and Black!”

Harry ventured, “What’s going on?”

“Those four – they’re pranksters. They only prank Slytherins, but their favorite target is Severus. Gryffindors.”

“I would suggest becoming accustomed to this sort of behavior,” Malfoy spoke to Harry, though his cold stare had returned to the steak he was cutting up. “You are a Slytherin now. No doubt with He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named’s recent behavior, it will grow worse.”

“Oh...I see. Aren’t you going to help him?”

“Just watch, Evander. Any counter curse-” as Bellatrix explained, another boy nearby stood up to cast one “-will only make the situation worse.” Right on cue, Snape’s mane and lion hair lengthened to waist-length and his whiskers gained another two inches. “We would be better off to leave it to Flitwick. He’s the Charms professor.” Despite his dislike of Snape, Harry couldn’t help but be bothered at the whole incident.

“Are these pranks common?” he wondered out loud.

“Only to Slytherins. This is one of their nicer jokes.” Tom stood. “What are you doing? Don’t even bother, Tom! You’ll just make it worse-” But Riddle was already heading towards Snape, his wand brandished. “He always does that...”

“Will he be able to reverse it?” Harry was honestly curious. The Dumbledore he knew always referred to Tom as some sort of a genius.

“Sometimes, but the four of them aren’t exactly inept at what they do. They’ve put a lot of thought into their work.” Lestrage sighed. Tom said some incantation, and the whiskers retracted...only to have their missing length added to the length of the hair. Snape tiredly waved him off, mumbling a “thank you”.

Glowing slightly, Riddle returned to them. “Well then Evander: you and I should head up to the Head dorms. Unless you want to watch the rest of this fiasco.”

"He's sleeping in the Head dorms?" Malfoy questioned.

"Yes. Dumbledore's orders."

"Don't forget about the Transfiguration essay," Lestrangle reminded.

Riddle closed his eyes. "Come by in half an hour. Let's go, Evander." Harry got up, just barely remembering to spew out a goodnight before the Head Boy had started leaving. He glanced over his shoulder at the Gryffindor table. Four of them were exchanging high-fives; could these be the pranksters? One of them was clearly a Metamorphagus; his hair was changing from neon yellow to orange as he spoke. Another two looked like brother and sister; the boy had the trademark Weasley red hair, while the girl had ginger. The last one had inky waves pooling by her shoulders.

"Potter, do keep up," Riddle snapped.

"Stuff it, Riddle!"

Ignoring him, Riddle continued. "I see you've seen the self-proclaimed 'Awesome Foursome'. I don't doubt that you approve of their behavior, seeing how much you despise purebloods."

"How the heck did you get that idea?" Harry stalked towards him. "I don't. And for your information, my best friend is a pureblood! Why would I approve of, what, discrimination against purebloods? That's ridiculous. Tables only turn so far."

"Oh really? And who, might I ask, is this so-called pureblood friend of yours? Mr. Figment of My Imagination?"

"You're just a roar of laughter Riddle. Ha, ha. But to answer your question, not that you'd know him, but his name is Ron Weasley. Satisfied?" Riddle's only response was the clenching of his jaws at the name. "By the way, is 'James' a wizard family?"

"Lucius is the walking, talking genealogy book, but I doubt it. He would probably have made some comment if it was." In what seemed

like an agonizing eternity, they finally reached the Head dorms. "Cockatrice," Riddle stated.

"Cockatrice?" Harry echoed, climbing into the common room.

"Get used to it. The weeks that it's my turn to choose passwords, it's going to be about serpents, Salazar-"

"Okay, I get it," Harry cut him off. "What about the other weeks?"

Tom's lip curled. "You'll enjoy the other weeks. The Head Girl is in Gryffindor; those passwords will all be about lions, Godric, swords, gold, maroon, posturing, righteous indignation at Slytherins, and etcetera."

Harry ignored the jibe. "I see." He looked around, storing away the fact that the Head Girl obviously didn't get along with Riddle. Maybe he had a potential ally, if she wasn't blinded by the fact that he was wearing green and silver now.

Practically all the decorations were dappled in some variation of gold and green: green pillows and cream sofas, green drapes, carpet, sandstone walls, golden lamps...Something told him that the common room was more of a war of wills than an actual compromise. He eyed the two stairwells leading up to the dorms. He didn't doubt for a moment that Riddle would try to murder him in his sleep, if he got the chance. But he didn't think there was anywhere else in the Head dorms that he'd be allowed to sleep in. Somehow, the he couldn't envision Dumbledore letting him sleep in the Head Girl's dorm.

Harry skipped up the first few stairs nearest him. He didn't slip back, so he guessed that it was the stairway to Riddle's dorm. I still can't believe that I have to share a room with that prick. Throwing a glance over his shoulder, he could tell that Riddle was thinking the same thing.

"Your belongings are probably going to be sitting on your bed," he said at last. "Let's make this arrangement: everything that belongs to you stays on the left, and everything that belongs to me stays on the right."



That goes for toothbrushes, clothes, and anything else you might have. Unless the headmaster changed the position, my bed should still be on the right, as well. Don't touch anything that's mine."

"Darn," Harry rolled his eyes. Riddle scowled and walked up the stairs. "I don't need an escort to the only door at the top of the stairs, Riddle."

"I'm not escorting you, Potter. I'm insuring the safety of my property."

"You do realize that I was being sarcastic about touching your stuff, don't you?" The other boy ignored him. Harry opened the door, either expecting the room to be full of either blood reds and blacks, or blinding silvers and greens. To his relief, it happened to be neither. Instead, everything seemed relatively normal, with no set colors: there was a mahogany wardrobe, two mahogany beds with blue sheets, nightstands, a small bookcase, and..."A toad?" he asked. "You have a toad in your room?"

"Yes," Riddle replied smoothly, crossing over to the poor, large, black-spotted amphibian sitting miserably on a pillow at the foot of his bed. "Will that be a problem?"

Well, aside from the fact that he had envisioned a toad to be the last choice for Voldemort's pet, Harry thought Riddle sounded a bit too smooth for his liking. So far, he'd either been ignoring him, been haughty, or been impatient. 'Smooth', especially for a Slytherin, translated to 'evasive' in his book. "If I do, I somehow doubt you'll get rid of the thing. What are you even feeding it? It looks terrible!"

"I have you know I'm feeding it a nutritious diet of worms, spiders, and crickets," Riddle retorted. Harry tried not to look disgusted. "Besides, it's my business how I treat my pets. Not yours."

"...Sure." Harry bit down the urge to argue just because he could. "It's going to smell. Can't you at least put it down in the common room?"

"No."

“Well why not? I, for one, don’t want to wake up to an unpleasant surprise of slime smeared all over my pajamas in the morning. Especially before History of Magic – why are you even taking that class? You could just drop it and sleep in. It’s not like anyone else isn’t doing that anyway. Save yourself the trouble of bringing a pillow to class.”

Riddle, who had been stroking the toad as if to console it, looked up in surprise. “You – but – you really don’t –? You sleep through History of Magic? You?”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “As if you don’t.” He jerked open the door attached to the bedroom, taking in the view of a white spacious bathroom. Alright, he hated Riddle, but the place was livable. Being in the Head dorms had its perks. “Why, what makes you think I’m an exception to such a timeless Hogwarts tradition?”

“You – well you,” Tom fumbled, “well I’ve been told that the other Potter ended up being quite concerned with...politics.”

“Talking about the so-called ‘Harry James Potter senior’, are we?”

“Yes. That would be correct.”

“Well, I’m not him. I don’t know what the Harry Potters are like in your world, but in mine, they definitely don’t like hearing about Goblin rebellions for their bedtime stories.”

“‘Your world’?”

“I’ve decided to operate on the theory that this is some sort of extremely messed up alternate universe,” he told him. “It explains all the changes and why you’re not a raging psychopath. At least, not yet.”

“And I never will be,” Riddle stated. “That theory sounds ridiculous, Potter. I think you’ve been watching too many science fiction movies.”

“Say what you like, it’s the best rationalization we have.”

"I prefer the simple one where you are merely delusional."

"Shut up." Harry approached his bed and unlocked the trunk resting on top of it. His wand, invisibility cloak, and secondhand copies of school text books and supplies lay inside, along with a schedule. He picked it up and tried not to groan. Riddle was almost as bad as Hermione. Luckily he wasn't taking Muggle Studies, Divination, and Astronomy, though that meant that he was currently taking the maximum amount of classes without having to use a time turner.

Tom watched Potter's every move, calculating just what sorts of enchantments he'd have to put to keep him away from his possessions - and himself. In the end, he decided on silencing charms on his curtains. He didn't need Potter knowing when he had another violent, scar-connected nightmare. Besides, the Dark Lord may loathe him, but he still had a Gryffindor's sense of honor, although it was a twisted one. He wouldn't attack him in the middle of the night, when his back was turned, or when he was down. That much was seen from the Triwizard Tournament, he shuddered. But what about the toad? He couldn't let Potter see what it was sitting on.

The solution came quickly. "Potter?"

"Riddle."

"I want your word that you won't try to bother my toad." He ignored the fact that Potter seemed to obviously think he was off his rocker. "Will you give it?" Once again, the Gryffindor honor would forbid him from breaking his word. As much as Tom hated him, he knew that the Dark Lord wasn't a liar. He never was. It only made sense that it would follow for his younger version as well.

Potter looked at the toad, which was croaking pitifully, and then at Riddle. "What's so special about that toad, Riddle?"

"It doesn't matter," he rejoined irritably. "Will you give your word, or not?"

The boy considered. Finally, he promised, "I won't go near your pet unless it's somehow a threat to my livelihood." He said it sarcastically, but Tom knew he could hold him to it.

"Good. We turn off the lights at eleven sharp. If, for any reason, you need it on, use the light in the common room, not the dorm." He grasped the door handle and walking down the staircase before Potter could yell what was clearly not going to be a compliment back at him. A more reasonable part of him commented that he probably shouldn't be treating anyone, let alone a Dark-Lord-in-the-making, like a first year, but he couldn't quite bring himself to care.

He drew out the quills and parchment stored in the table in the common room, waiting for Bellatrix to arrive with her Transfiguration essay in tow. She really was becoming a lot more studious these days. She already had an O in Transfiguration, but, for some reason, she still insisted on having him help her with her work.

And Potter...he was laughing at them today, Tom was certain of it. It sickened him that he would have to somehow integrate the Gryffindor into his circle of friends if he wanted to keep an eye out on him and learn his weaknesses, like Dumbledore said. Am I betraying them? he wondered, thinking about how Bella hated the Dark Lord, and how Lucius' mansion was recently burned down and his parents kidnapped by him. Would they understand if I told them, or be too furious to care for the reasons? Either way, it doesn't matter. I can't tell them.

He sighed. Hopefully Potter doesn't snore...

A/N: Alright, time for me to make excuses for not updating in two weeks - summer camp. Really, the schedule there was beastly...but I finally churned out this chapter. Thanks so much to everyone who reviewed! I was amazed at the reponse! But, once again, if you don't hate me enough to review, I was wondering what you thought of my attempt at some humor in this chapter? I wasn't too happy with it, but I thought it was alright. what do you think of Bellatrix? Do you like her character, or think it's believable? is anyone raising eyebrows at Riddle's 'pet'? I plan to have that dragged into the plot later. Thanks for reading!

## Chapter Seven

When Harry felt the 7:30 am sunlight assault his eyelids, he didn't move. He could hear Riddle stirring behind the drapes at the other side of the room.

It was a miracle that either one of them had fallen asleep at all. Harry had to admit that he was savagely disappointed. He was half hoping that Riddle would be too busy quaking in fear to sleep. Oh well, he thought, look on the bright side. You're alive. For now.

He feigned sleep. If Riddle was going to suffocate him with a pillow, blast him with Avada Kedavra, sic his potentially poisonous toad on him, or kill him in some other creative and unpleasant manner, chances were he'd do it when Harry was asleep and vulnerable.

Let's see just how much trust I can afford around you, snake boy. He waited.

Tom groaned and slide to his feet, cradling his head in his hands. His wrist hurt, he had a tremendous headache, and he kept on waking up at random intervals during the night for no reason he could explain other than Slytherin paranoia. Why do I feel like I've just been trampled by a hippogriff?

Well, his wrist hurt because he had been 'tutoring' Bella, who didn't even need to be tutored. As for the other two...He opened his eyes and bit down a curse.

Potter! That was why he felt like the Giant Squid had just digested him!

"And professor Dumbledore," he muttered, eyeing Potter warily. The boy was still apparently sleeping, his jet-black hair tousled and one impeccably toned arm strewn over his pillow. How he wished he could just hex, jinx, curse, or just physically hit him. In fact, he could swear that his wand was shrieking at him, begging to be used.

Unfortunately, that wasn't something that common sense allowed him to do. Instead, he glanced at the clock. 7:32 am. If you can't get a

good revenge, then settle for a temporary petty one, he decided. He wasn't going to wake Potter up. Let him stew in whatever dreams or, Tom hoped, nightmares he's having until it is too late. Feeling somewhat more satisfied, he picked out his clothes for the day and took them with him into the conjoined bathroom.

Once the door shut, Harry opened an eye. It looked like Riddle wasn't making an attempt on his life yet. Must be strategically unwise, he shrugged. Offing me later on in the year gives more suspects. He reached out, held his glasses out in front of his eyes, and frowned. The bed sheets looked blurrier than he remembered them from yesterday. Perfect, he scowled, my vision has improved. Now I'm stuck in a stage where it's too blurry without them, and too blurry with them. At least with bad eyesight, putting the glasses on fixed the problem.

He leapt up and rapped on the door just as he heard the telltale signs of a shower starting. "Hey Riddle," he called. An extremely reluctant "yes" came in reply. "Don't take long. I want to get to breakfast early." And avoid all the Slytherins.

"I don't take long, Potter," was the waspish answer.

"Uh huh." Somehow, Harry doubted that.

A croak interrupted him before he could shout back a retort. Harry blinked. The giant toad, which Harry personally thought looked more like a lumpy brown cushion with eyeballs, looked pathetically at him. Harry shifted uncomfortably. The thing was just staring at him...

"...Are you hungry?" he finally asked. No response. Harry inched away, only to have the toad follow each and every movement. More silence. Harry cleared his throat and -

rummaged through his new books again. All of his books appeared secondhand, which wasn't too bad, except that the Slytherins would go sneer-happy all over him. He flipped through the Transfiguration book, seeing few scribbles here and there. The Defense book was clean, though it looked like the previous owner had mistaken it for a meal at some point. The rest were fine, and the History book, Harry

practically cried for joy, had notes scribbled all over it. Yes, he grinned, no more of Binns' stupid lectures! It was like having the History version of the Half-Blood Prince's book.

He lovingly hugged his new savior; he'd been awful at History every year before, and he doubted that was going to start changing this year. Why couldn't Dumbledore let him choose his own classes instead of taking all of Riddle's?

Because he doesn't trust you, the same nasty voice from his Sorting in the headmaster's office reminded him with a smirk. Harry told it to shut up. He adjusted his not-so-helpful glasses and loped towards the dresser where he had heard house elves delivering his Hogwarts robes. Sure enough, there they were, neatly pressed and marred by the Slytherin crest. Harry glared and, after changing into day clothes, forced his way into them.

Riddle still wasn't done with his shower. In fact, Harry had the sneaking suspicion that he would take even longer in there than necessary. He fell back over on his bed and mulled over what he planned to do. Assuming his crackpot theory about being in an alternate universe was correct, he had to research a way to get back. Well, it couldn't be that crackpot. After all, Luna had said, "They've sensed what you, or the other you, if my guess is right, is trying to do..."

He paused. Suddenly, the fact that he had been talking about Luna, of all people, made his theory a lot less believable.

But she had been right about Nargles, or whatever that was that was chasing us, he reasoned. His fingers found the mildly glowing runes warming his chest. Somehow, he had gotten here because of it. Based on that, he had a direction to go for his research. The etchings looked Gaelic, possibly. Maybe even Celtic. He wasn't sure.

"Let's just get out of here as soon as possible," Harry muttered to himself. Any universe where Riddle was trusted by Dumbledore for no apparent reason, Dumbledore hated him, and all the people he knew were missing wasn't his idea of an ideal vacation.

Harry checked the clock again. 7:43. "Riddle! Hurry up! I'd like to brush my teeth today, if that's fine by you!" Riddle didn't answer, but the same hearing that he had cursed yesterday allowed him to hear the indelicate snort the Head Boy made.

That settled it. Riddle was doing this on purpose. "Hey," Harry glanced up, spotting a portrait snoozing to his left. "Hello!" The grumpy old man in the painting grunted and seemed to growl at him.

"What? I'm trying to sleep 'ere, you young ruffian!"

The green eyed boy retorted, "Aren't we all? Look, is there a painting in the bathroom?" The man huffed. "Well, is there?"

"Yeah, yeah, there is. What about it?"

"Can you check the bathroom for me, and tell me whether there's a curtain over the shower?" Anything that would keep him from being blinded by the sight of Riddle in less than appropriate attire. The man grumbled and stalked off, only to return seconds later with an affirmative. "Thanks."

Harry took out his wand, somersaulted it into the air before catching it, and pointed it towards the door. "Alohomora." The door buckled and slowly opened. Harry yanked the toiletries that he'd been provided with and strode in.

Curls of steam unfurled over his face. Shower water battered the floor from the white-tiled shower in the corner. Despite what the portrait said, Harry kept his eyes locked solely on sink in front of him, in the off chance that he might have a little 'surprise' when he least expected it. Taking his toothbrush out, he layered it with toothpaste and started brushing.

Scrubbing his hands over his coppery curls, Tom paused. He could have sworn he'd heard the facet running. But would have meant that either a ghost had slipped in, Black had decided to play some hellish, perverted prank on him, or...He stuck his wet face just slightly out of the curtains, only to be greeted by the sight of the back of the bane of his existence. "Potter! What the Hell are you doing in here?!"



Potter's green eyes seemed to be suction-cupped to the sink. "Brushing my teeth, Riddle. I believe that's what people do with toothbrushes."

"I'm having a shower!"

From the reflection in the mirror, Tom could see him roll his eyes. "I'd say I can see that, but really, I don't, and I certainly don't want to."

Fuming, he snapped, "Get out!" His wand wasn't close enough in reach. He searched for some weapon he could lob at the dark lord's head. A pitiful bar of soap seemed to be the only thing available.

"Don't think I don't know that you're stalling just to make me late," Potter said through a mouthful of paste. He rinsed his mouth. "There. I'm leaving. Happy?"

Tom was about to sneer that yes, he was happy, when he realized something. "Wait, you can't leave!" Potter whirled around, his attempt to look straight ahead forgotten, and drenched him in a horrified look. "That's not what I meant! My goodness...I meant that you can't go anywhere without me." Potter's eyes went from mortified to annoyed in less than a second. "Stay in that room and don't go anywhere."

"I don't need a baby sitter Riddle!"

"Headmaster's orders Potter."

Harry loathed the smooth, almost triumphant tone oozing out of the young Voldemort's voice. "You're pretty smug for someone who can't do anything about it. Bye Riddle. It wasn't a pleasure." He slammed the door shut, ignoring the verbal flaying the other boy was raining down on him. There's no way, Harry asserted, that I'm spending any more time with that prick than necessary. He threw the text books into his bag, charmed it so it would be practically weightless, and vaulted down the stairs to the common room.

He had just landed on the bottom stair when a girl's irate voice bellowed down at him, "Riddle!" Harry's eyes widened and shot up to

the room he had just escaped from. Riddle wasn't there. Wait, was she talking to him?

"Over here, you snake!" the girl continued, making her way down the stairs. Harry turned and froze. Vaguely, he registered the fact that she was the girl he had seen high –fiving yesterday after the prank. But that was hardly the reason why he was staring.

The shape of her face, nose, and the dark waves of her hair were all painfully familiar. Her skin held a bronze tint, and her eyes were a dark blue instead of grey, but he still recognized those features. "Sirius," he breathed without even realizing it.

The girl froze, her eyes misted with confusion before being replaced by wariness, and then shock. Her eyes darted over his face. Harry heard her gasp. Finally, she said, "You – you aren't Riddle." Quickly, she schooled her features into a polite look of interest.

"N-no," Harry replied, wrenching himself out of his reverie. "I'm H – Evander James."

"Evander," she repeated slowly. He felt himself frowning at the odd look she was giving him. "How do you know my grandfather?"

"Grand – wait, Sirius is your grandfather?"

"Of course. You must be the new seventh year, right? Why would a Slytherin know my grandfather, of all people? You don't look like a Black."

For a moment, Harry was too stunned to do anything but gape. Sirius is her grandfather! This is insane! Then he forced himself to speak. "He's a family friend – and I'm not a Slytherin!"

"Oh? Could have fooled me."

Harry slapped a hand over that blasted green and silver crest. "I had no choice, alright? Professor Dumbledore wanted me to stick close to the Head Boy." He jerked a thumb behind him.

The girl's face crinkled into an almost Slytherin-worthy sneer. "Ah, Dumbledore, that traitor," she spat. "Always favoring Slytherins over his own house! He should be helping Gryffindor's Heir, not impeding him by helping Fork Tongue over there!"

"Fork Tongue," Harry mused. "I'm guessing you're talking about Riddle?" Who was 'Gryffindor's Heir'? He decided not to ask just in case it was an answer he should know.

"Yes." She smiled. "It's always nice to trash that bugger, and especially refreshing to find a Slytherin who agrees. I'm sorry that you have to suffer in the snake pit. By the way, my name's Jasmine. I'm the Head Girl and president of Riddle's hate club."

Grinning, Harry shook her hand. "There's really a club for that?"

"Definitely. Though officially, we're JAERA, the Junior Activists for Equal Rights. We organize all the pro-Muggleborn and mixed blood rights awareness events. Naturally, the purebloods hate us." Jasmine's eyes twinkled, but, unlike the headmaster's, it had a mischievous gleam to it. "You can join us. Usually, we're quite exclusive. We've almost never had a Slytherin join. But you look..." she gave him that odd look again. "You look like the type who'd agree with our stance."

A prickle of anger nipped at him. "Why wouldn't I agree with equality for Muggleborns and mixed bloods? I'm not a bigot. Besides, my mum was a Muggleborn."

"Oh, I didn't mean that. You know. I meant that you seem like the type that would really agree with it. Like you'd be willing to stand up for it and not just talk about it." She was assessing him, Harry was sure of it. Something told him that she was trying to say something completely different, and that he was completely missing it. But he gave a slow nod anyway and a smile so reminiscent of Sirius' flourished on her lips. "Excellent! We're having a meeting in a few days, actually. We were aiming for tomorrow, but Dumbledore keeps on trying to cancel it. Interested?"

“Sure-”

“Po – Evander!”

Harry groaned and turned around. Riddle bounded down the stairs, his wand drawn as if he was going to hex him. “Good morning Riddle,” he greeted sarcastically.

“It’s Tom,” Riddle snapped, glancing pointedly at Jasmine before returning to Harry. “Or do you not remember?”

Harry was tempted to say that he remembered, but he just didn’t care. Instead he just rolled his eyes. “Are all Slytherins this charming?” he asked out loud.

Jasmine laughed. “You really should have been in Gryffindor, Evander.” Riddle flinched but Harry ignored him. “I approve. Come. You can sit with us for breakfast.” She reached for his arm.

“He’s not sitting with you,” Riddle stated coldly. “Release him, Black.”

“As if you want him sitting with you, Riddle. I can see you hate him. What, did he stand up for a Muggleborn?”

He ignored the comment. “The headmaster asked me to keep an eye on him and I shall.”

“Oh, but surely the coot would approve of Evander making friends outside of your little serpents? Promote inter-house relations and all.”

“You’re sounding very Slytherin, Black. Are you certain that the Hat didn’t put you in the incorrect house?”

“Shut up Riddle! I’m Gryffindor through and through! Besides, you can’t tell him what to do!” Jasmine stormed out of the common room with Harry in tow and Riddle stalking after them.

“Oh? Watch me.” He glared at Harry. “Po – Evander, we are leaving. Unless, of course, you would prefer a detention.”

“What?” Harry cried, outraged. “You can’t give me detention!”

“Why yes I can.” He carelessly flicked his Head Boy badge. “You’re sitting with me.”

“No, don’t listen to him Evander,” Jasmine half-ordered. “I’m Head Girl. If he gives you a detention, I’ll give one of his friends a detention.”

“Making threats are we?” Riddle raised an eyebrow. “That doesn’t sound very chivalrous, O noble Gryffindor.”

At this point, bleary, barely-alive students were wandering the halls. Half of them had hunched over and jammed their hands over their ears in a futile effort to drown out the sound of their Head Boy and Girl’s daily sparring match. The shouts ricocheted across the castle, puncturing the ears of anyone unfortunate enough to be caught in the crossfire.

Harry felt Jasmine tug on his arm and an equally harsh tug answered in response. She had seized his left wrist while Riddle had manacled the other. “He’s sitting with me and that’s final!”

“No, he’s not.”

“Yes, he is!”

“No, he’s not!”

“Yes, he-”

“Enough!” Harry broke in, interrupting the brilliant show of maturity. “Look, I’m sure professor Dumbledore won’t mind if I sit with the Gryffindors. What’s the worst that can happen-?”

“The worst that can happen’?” Tom repeated as if he was insane. “The worst that can happen is that-” He halted just before he could say something that would reveal Potter’s less than law abiding status. The worst that can happen, he hissed to himself, is that Potter takes

charge of his junior Death Eater minions! "The worse that can happen is that you will..." He struggled to find some excuse.

"What, Riddle?" Jasmine mocked. "He'll make friends? Or, worse, he'll make a Muggleborn friend?" It suddenly occurred to Harry that the three of them were barricading the entrance to the Great Hall and that the whole student population was watching them. "Or a half-blood friend, perhaps? You're a hypocrite and a traitor, Riddle!"

Stepping from the teacher's table, a woman crossed over to them, her blonde plait thumping her back. "Good morning, Jasmine. Is Mr. Riddle bothering you again?"

Jasmine hesitated. "No, professor Bones. I was just hoping that Evander would sit next to me, but Riddle is insisting that he should keep away from us."

Tom stifled a scoff. It was all posturing. He was certain that Black was just dying to tell Bones the truth, but for the sake of pretending to be a noble Gryffindor, she was 'stretching the truth' to the stanch Dark Lord supporter. It was just like all the entire 'cause' the Dark Lord championed: it was just a way to seek power hidden behind a façade of advocating equal rights.

"Professor," he began to invent, pretending not to notice the disgusted look the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher was giving him. "I regret if Miss Black believes that this was my intention. I merely think that it would be in Evander's best interest to sit with his House. We know his schedule and have already started to...bond with him." Potter erupted into a fit of coughing. Tom felt his teeth grinding.

"Are you alright, Evander?" Jasmine asked with what sounded like concern. Tom didn't know whether to be sick or appalled. It wasn't possible for any Gryffindor, especially Black, to ever give a Slytherin a polite nod, let alone a true show of concern.

Tom felt ice worming its way into his gut. Black had always bragged that the Dark Lord was like a godfather to her. What if she was telling the truth? What if she had seen Lord Hadrian's face and matched it to

Potter's? What if she knew what was going on? What if she planned to help Potter complete his diabolical machinations? What if -

"Mr. Riddle," Bones was almost preening, "clearly you feel the need to recruit yet another hapless victim into your pureblood supremacy cause. You must be trying to take advantage of the fact that he's a new student. Unfortunately for you, Mr. Riddle, that won't be happening. Miss Black, if you please?"

"Yes professor." Black grinned while Potter smirked at him. Yes, smirked.

"Professor," Tom tried one last time, cursing her with all his might, "that was not my intention-"

"Silence, Riddle." She waved an airy hand. "Celebrity status won't get you everywhere. Miss Black, I hope I can trust your judgment about...him?" Her eyes narrowed at Harry, who was searching her face. She had a startling resemblance to Susan Bones. Was this another weird twist in this new world? If Sirius was Jasmine's grandfather, then it was possible.

"Oh yes, professor," Jasmine assured while steering Harry away. "He's one of the good snakes." The teacher only crossed her arms in response and walked away. Harry turned his back to Riddle, inwardly rejoicing that he was finally free of him!

"Thanks," he said to Jasmine as she waved to the Gryffindors. The three he had seen yesterday hollered at her to come over while the rest of the years gave enthusiastic smiles. Harry inwardly breathed a sigh of relief. It was Gryffindor again, and completely different from the reserved nods even someone as popular as Riddle had received when he approached.

"No problem, Evander." As they strode past, Harry was treated to a barrage of glares, scowls, and general hostile behavior that made him pause. It was eerie to see from his own house. "Welcome, Evander," she gestured dramatically, "to the Lion's den."

Harry grinned. "Good to be here."

“Jasmine, what’s a Snake doing over here?” A boy with what could only be the trademark Weasley red hair demanded. A ginger haired girl sat next to him, eyeballing Harry as if he were a blast-ended skrewt.

The third was a metamorphagus. He lifted his head from the book he was reading and regarded him with a finely carved unreadable expression before it broke into surprise. “Jasmine...” He cleared his throat and recovered, but his eyes were darting across Harry’s face much like Jasmine’s had been when they had first met. “Who is this?”

“My name is Evander James,” Harry answered, slightly annoyed that he hadn’t actually been addressed. “And you are?”

The boy, probably a fellow seventh year, stopped his scan. “Teddy Lupin.” He stood and held out a hand, which a stunned Harry shook.

“Lupin’? As in Remus Lupin?”

“Yes. He’s my father.”

The effect of the sudden news flurried around him like a hurricane. He just barely managed to shake it off to respond. “That’s great! I know – I mean - I’ve heard good things about him.” Wonderful, Potter. Taking into account Remus’ werewolf status, did you really think that lie would fly?

Skeptically, Teddy replied, “Really?”

“...Yes. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Equally, Evander. This is Rose Weasley.” The brunette greeted him. “And the artless one over here is Hugo.”

“Hey you neon light show, I’m not artless!”

Shaking her head, Jasmine slid in beside Teddy and gave him a kiss on the cheek. “How’s breakfast today?”



"Not bad. The French toast is a tad bit dry, though." He picked up the massive array of books that had been hogging the space next to him. "Please, sit here, Evander." Harry shrugged and sunk into the seat. Across from him, Slytherins were stabbing him with either icy or searing gazes. Riddle was watching him like a hawk.

Soft flutters and hooting called from above. The morning post had arrived.

Hugo let out a yelp as one of the descending owls nipped his finger, dropping a copy of the Daily Prophet in front of him so that it just barely missed the cereal. "Alright, alright, you stupid bird." He fished for a coin and tossed it to the impatient owl. It hooted and took off. Muttering under his breath, Hugo pulled open the paper. "Hey, look at this!" He prodded the page. "Dad get's the front page all to himself!"

Jasmine cheered. "It's one of Lee Jordan's stories, isn't it?" She peered at Teddy's copy while Harry did the same. Trying not to get caught up in the fact that so far all the friends he knew were adults, he read.

Ronald Weasley Broken Out of Azkaban!

In an almost frightening display of pure power and daring, He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named and his followers attacked Azkaban, freeing several Death Eaters, among which was Ronald Weasley. As our readers know, Weasley is often referred to as the Dark Lord's Right Hand, his most brilliant strategist and tactician. With his escape, it isn't hard to imagine the Ministry's legs trembling. Clearly, old pureblood families and their supporters can only hope the Ministry doesn't crumble under this new weight.

Harry pulled out of the page, his mind reeling. Ron was a Death Eater? Ron was in Azkaban? And...Ron was Hugo's and Rose's dad?

"I love how he manages all that subtle bias," Jasmine sighed dreamily. "Lee is a genius."

"Yes, he certainly is masterful." Teddy went back to reading his book.

“Ron went to Azkaban.”

Rose’s nose crinkled. “Yeah, ‘Ron’ did. Is that really so hard to believe?”

“Yeah,” Harry responded. “He isn’t a criminal!” The ‘Awesome Foursome’ burst into laughter. “What?”

“Isn’t a criminal’...Evander, you are funny.”

“Do you really believe that the Ministry would allow Mr. Weasley to support Muggleborns and mixed bloods the way he has? His political activism would certainly have gotten him apprehended. Much like many other social reformers.” Teddy raised a cup of orange juice, chuckling. “To political activists.”

“To political activists,” the rest intoned and downed their drinks.

“Wait, are you saying that the Dark Lord supports Muggleborn rights?”

“And equal rights in general.”

“How do you not know this? Surely Spain has heard about our Lord?”

Harry noted the phrase ‘our Lord’ with mingled horror and fascination. “You support him?”

“Yeah, why wouldn’t we? My mum is a Muggleborn,” Hugo growled. “You have something against that?” It was then that Harry realized that if Ron was Hugo’s father and Hermione was married to Ron...

Agh! Excuse me while I purge those mental images!

“No, not at all - I’m a half-blood – but Voldemort supports purebloods! He’s always advocating blood supremacy!” There were no flinches, only confusion.

Jasmine asked, “Who is ‘Voldemort’?”

“W-what? How can you not-?” He cut himself off. Voldemort wasn’t in this world? Well obviously, Potter. He’s sitting right at the Slytherin table! Then who was it?

“You must have the wrong dark lord, Evander,” was Teddy’s dry response. Harry shook his head and cut up some pancakes. “Either way, I’m surprised this came out. My father -

said that Mr. Weasley was broken out of Azkaban a week ago. I didn’t expect that even Lee Jordan could uncover this gem of a scandal from the Ministry’s clutches.”

Hugo slurped his cereal. Rose made a disgusted noise. “Hugo, have some manners! But yes, Teddy, I’m surprised to. Though that would explain why the Dark Lord’s emotion thermometer was bawling his eyes out last Tuesday.” She cocked her head behind her. “Mum never tells us anything when we ask. She’s so overprotective!”

Harry snapped to attention. Of course! If Harry wasn’t the Boy Who Lived here, then there must be another one! It might even be a Girl Who Lived. Anything was possible!

He opened his mouth but then shut it. He couldn’t ask something like that. Everyone, foreign or not, would have heard of the Boy Who Lived. The Sheltered Excuse wouldn’t work here. Harry cursed.

“We should get to class,” Rose started. Teddy shut his book in agreement. Since their first class was together, Harry collected his stuff and walked out to History of Magic with them, ignoring the Slytherins who were silently vowing to kill him.

Binns was just as inspiring as usual. Harry sank into the rickety seat at the back of the room that was probably as old as the history professor was. Scrolls suffocated the walls, garnished with enough dust to make any moth squeal in delight.

Jasmine claimed the seat next to him, earning a raised eyebrow from Teddy, but he didn’t object. He took the nearest seat next to them

and pulled parchment and quills from his bag. Class began with Binns not even noticing or acknowledging 'Evander's' presence. More information that Harry cared to know about goblin wars buzzed around his ears.

Once again, Harry felt the familiar feeling of being stabbed hit his side. He glanced to his right and was not surprised to see Riddle glaring at him from the Slytherin territory of the classroom. After Jasmine, who, for some reason that probably had nothing to do with his infectious personality, had taken a liking to him, quelled the rest of the Gryffindors' suspicious glowers by explaining that he was a 'good Snake', they'd reluctantly accepted him into the pack. She had even whispered to a few nearby that asked what made him different that he'd been placed in Slytherin by Dumbledore. As soon as she said the words, Harry had seemed to earn their wholehearted approval. The back row had spent the first ten minutes of class in a tirade against the headmaster.

While Harry had been shocked at how much the Gryffindors of all people hated Dumbledore, he hadn't made any strong objections. Not only did he think he might learn something from the rant, but he also wasn't feeling warm and fuzzy about this world's headmaster either. After all, he'd stolen his wand at one point, Stunned him, accused him of being a spy, and locked him in the same House and dorm with Lord Voldemort, who he vividly recalled trying to kill him consistently since he turned eleven.

The Slytherins once again sent him hateful looks, making it impossible to ignore Binns' droning completely, even if he was sitting deep in the Lion's lair.

Sighing, he started throwing up Notice-Me-Not charms around his general area. Teddy, who had recognized the start of the incantation, stopped writing. Harry raised an eyebrow. -

"That is," the metamorphagus whispered in response to the unsaid question, "and extremely advanced spell. How did you learn it?"

Underground fight clubs. "Here and there," Harry answered vaguely. He searched for something that he could transfigure into a pillow. He

found none. "Darn..." Harry stopped his pretense of pretending to listen and resting his head on the table, much to Teddy's and Rose's disapproval and Jasmine's amusement.

Binns didn't notice a thing, though if he hadn't put the charms on, he probably wouldn't have either. With that, Harry had no choice but to part from the Gryffindors and endure Transfiguration sitting next to Riddle.

"Hello, Evander," he mocked.

"Riddle," Harry snarled as quietly as he possibly could, "get out of that seat. There's no way I'm sitting next to you."

"Temper, Potter, temper. I'm merely performing my duties as Head Boy."

"Stuff it! Go sit with Malfoy or Le – Black."

Professor McGonagall's voice interrupted their argument. "Mr. James, are you done muttering, or must I hand out detentions?"

Harry turned. Why did she automatically assume it was his fault? "Sorry, professor." He distinctly caught Riddle smirking from the corner of his eye. Harry took out his textbook and placed it as a barrier between him and Riddle. He trained his eyes ahead as she started talking about how they were going to transfigure tea cups into birds, and about how it was more difficult to transfigure objects that were dissimilar and larger than the original. Inanimate to animate was apparently the most difficult type of transfiguration.

With a swish of her wand, McGonagall sent tea cups floating towards everyone's desks. Harry picked up his tea cup, noting the chip on one side. Riddle idly tapped his wand on the cup. It transformed instantly into a parakeet.

"Well done, Mr. Riddle," McGonagall smiled. "Ten points to Slytherin."

Harry glared at the smug boy, disregarding his unspoken rule to ignore the git. Not only had Riddle been the first to transfigure the cup,

but he had also done it without a verbal incantation. Harry pointed his own wand at the cup, which burst into a cockatoo. McGonagall, who was watching the exchange, said nothing. Her lips thinned and she gave a curt nod.

“She didn’t look too impressed, Potter,” Riddle remarked so that only Harry would hear. He chuckled and pointed his wand at the bird, which suddenly found itself a rabbit. Harry answered the unspoken challenge. He transfigured his own.

The two boys progressively transformed their test subjects into larger and more elaborate creatures. Several students from both Slytherin and Ravenclaw had abandoned their own attempts to watch the battle.

“Not bad, Potter,” Riddle drawled.

“You’re not too shabby yourself, Riddle.”

“Why, thank you.” Suddenly, he smirked. “How about we see you do this.” He pointed his wand over at a statue at the corner of the classroom. A jet of light shot out of the tip of his wand and the statue came to life, stretching its arms.

Harry’s grip on his wand tightened. It was just like in the Department of Mysteries – Dumbledore had done the exact same thing. Mentally, he cursed. He was good at -

Transfiguration, very good, in fact. But he’d neglected to pay much attention to the subject during his training. He’d been focusing on Charms, Defense, and physical fighting. This was clearly a spell past NEWT level, and he didn’t know if it was within his capabilities.

He paused. Harry loathed to ask Riddle what the incantation was; Riddle had done it silently, after all. But he wasn’t going to back down. “What’s the incantation?”

“Excuse me?”

Harry grit his teeth, not oblivious to the self-satisfaction weaved in the other boy's tone. "I said, what's the incantation?"

"Oh, you don't know? Pity."

"Riddle, just say it."

He twirled his wand. "I don't think so, Potter. Give up. That's an advanced spell. You'd need to practice many times before you had even a hope of getting it correct."

The words stuck like barbs. "Just say," he whipped around to glare at him, "the incantation!"

Tom felt a sharp tug of Legilimency and immediately threw up Occlumency shields. "You're already a Legilimens?" he demanded.

"What the bugger are you talking about?"

"What do you think I'm talking about? How dare you even try to-!"

A loud crash ended the conversation. The statue Tom had animated had just tripped over something. McGonagall stared in shock for a moment before levitating the statue back to its original place and ending the spells on it. "Who-?" Her eyes briefly roamed the classroom before snapping onto Potter. "Mr. James, detention. I will not have you disrupting my class!"

"What?" Potter exclaimed at the unfairness. "But I didn't even cast the spell!"

"Mr. James, please refrain from raising your voice."

"But-"

"He's telling the truth, professor," Tom informed her, trying not to let glee show on his face. "Evander can't cast that spell. It's very complex." Inwardly, he gloated at the furious flush smacking Potter's face. See Hadrian? I will beat you.

Harry, on the other hand, was thinking something different. Alright Riddle, if that's how you want to play, we'll play it. No snake-faced murder is going to best me.

The two battled it out in Charms and Potions. To Harry's chagrin, not only was Potions taught by Slughorn, but the professor seemed to have some pathological need to drown Riddle in compliments every time he did something as insignificant as chop roots correctly. Not only that, but Harry was forced to be Riddle's partner, and it was obvious that he was rubbish at Potions. Riddle was having a field day.

On the other hand, he beat him in Charms, and Flitwick had been so impressed with Harry that he'd awarded Slytherin 20 points and praised that, "You must have had excellent professors, Mr. James, to have beaten our very own Tom Riddle." Harry had just barely kept from dissolving into a fit from his victory. Riddle's face had been priceless.

Defense Against the Dark Arts is next, Harry thought to himself. He and the Slytherins were filing down the corridor to the classroom. I'll beat Riddle then. If there's one thing I refuse to be beaten in, it's DADA. He glanced at the tall Head Boy, who Bellatrix had stolen for a moment. They appeared to be having some sort of an argument. Not that Harry cared. Slughorn's dotting was enough to make him nauseous. No doubt Riddle was at the top of the Slug Club hierarchy. Luckily I'll never be good enough with potions to get invited, he consoled himself.

"Tom," Bellatrix asked, blissfully unaware that Harry could hear her, "why are you and Evander fighting?"

"Fighting? We're not fighting."

"Oh? Than what do you call what you've been doing for every single class we've had? It's obvious you were competing to prove some point."



"Fighting to prove a point? Bella, you are mistaken," Tom insisted while burning a hole through 'Evander's' head with his eyes. "I was merely curious as to what Evander had learned, as he was me."

"You're lying."

"What makes you say that?"

"First is the fact that you've been answering my questions with questions. You don't do that unless you're trying to be evasive. Second is that I know you. I can tell when you lie."

Tom squashed the urge to answer with another question. Sometimes friends really made things difficult. "Bella, I'm just performing my duty as Head Boy. Dumbledore asked me to look out for Evander-"

Bellatrix sighed. "Look, I don't need an explanation. If you two got off on the wrong foot, that's your business. Just don't insult my intelligence." Tom winced. That was the last thing he wanted to do. But he was just assessing the Dark Lord's skills, wasn't he? Yes, of course he was. This wasn't about spite at all. It was just about finding out more about his opponent. Yes. Of course.

They walked into the classroom. Bellatrix didn't miss what she was certain was a look of distaste cross Evander's face as Tom sauntered over to him. This in itself was strange. Tom didn't saunter. But also, what could possibly have transpired in the last 24 hours to make them hate each other so much?

A thought crossed her mind. She remembered the first day she had met Evander in the hall. She had asked if they were related and the two of them vehemently denied it. At that point, they couldn't have known each other for more than a few minutes. What if they had some past history? Maybe they both lived in Little Hangleton? 'James' was a Muggle surname.

"Alright, settle down everyone." Professor Bones clapped her hands and everyone scrambled to their seats. "Since you've all had me for years, I highly doubt that anyone but our more incompetent students,"

Harry noticed her attention flick over to the Slytherins, “will need me to reintroduce myself. Mr. James, I trust you remember my name?”

“Yes professor.”

“Excellent. You seem to have a good memory. Tell me then, Mr. James, if you remember what the incantation for Fiendfyre is?” Anything that could possibly pass as a good mood in the classroom abruptly died. Harry was aware of all eyes pelting him like some less lethal version -

of being stoned to death. The Slytherins refused to look at him. The Gryffindors were boring holes into him.

Great, he muttered to himself. What in blazes is Fiendfyre? As if I would know the incantation for that. Is it some sort of protective shield? Was everyone assigned summer homework to read about it? Or is this meant to humiliate me like Snape’s questions in first year? Well, whatever it is, Harry didn’t like not knowing the answer. He also didn’t like the small sneer on professor Bones’ face.

“Well, Mr. James? Are you ready to give us an answer yet? The class is eagerly waiting.” Surprisingly, it was a couple of the Slytherins that laughed, not the Gryffindors. So much for House loyalty.

“I don’t know.”

“What? You’ll have to speak louder, Mr. James.”

“I said,” Harry glared, “I don’t know.”

“And are you aware of what Fiendfyre is?”

He couldn’t restrain a sarcastic response. Why was she picking on him for no reason? “Fire that’s fiendish?” But instead of snapping at him like he’d expected, she gave a laugh – a genuine laugh. Behind him, Bellatrix looked incredulous and Lucius glowered.

“Very good, Mr. James,” she congratulated. The Gryffindors began smiling and even whispering to each other. Harry was completely

confused. Hadn't he answered it incorrectly? But professor Bones answered his unsaid question. "It seems you aren't the corrupted creature the rest of your housemates are. Fiendfyre is amongst the most dangerous and darkest of spells in the Dark Arts arsenal." She turned to the Lions' side of the classroom. "Miss Black, I applaud you – you're assessment was correct."

"Thank you, professor," Jasmine smiled.

The glares on the Slytherin side were mauling Harry's back.

"And now, speaking of Fiendfyre..." The professor launched into her lesson.

While the Gryffindors dutifully scribbled their notes, Lucius leaned over. "It seems your association with the Gryffindors paid off, did it not, Evander?" he whispered. Harry's quill hovered above his parchment. "Bones favors you as highly as the other members of all the other Houses. Not like a slimy Slytherin."

"She doesn't-" He bit off the words. It was blatantly true. "Just because I sat with Jasmine, doesn't mean that I hate Slytherins."

"On a first name basis, are you? We Slytherins only have the honor of being called by our last names. I had hoped that you would have had some House loyalty, Evander."

"House loyalty'? You're accusing me of not having 'House loyalty' when you were just laughing at the fact that I didn't know what Fiendfyre was?"

"Wait-" Riddle tried to interrupt.

Bellatrix flung open the next page in her textbook a little too loudly. "That's not the point, Evander!" she hissed. "You know all the Gryffindors are Death Eaters in the making! Or do you hate us inbreeds as well?"

"Don't bother, Bella," Lucius stated coldly. "He probably cheered along with the rest of them when Weasley was released."

“What’s wrong with Ron, aside from the fact that he isn’t rich like a Malfoy?” was Harry’s scathing reply. Riddle inhaled sharply but he ignored him. “If Ron was really put into -

Azkaban for helping Muggleborns, then he deserved to breakout! This is just typical Ministry rubbish – they’re all completely corrupt.”

Tom hadn’t realized how painfully he was gripping his hands together until then. Potter was completely unaware of what he had just said. Not only had he just spouted the Dark Lord’s propaganda like, well, the Dark Lord himself, but he’d also just insulted the Ministry, which, while often unfair, was one of the last lines of defense left for the old pureblood families. The Dark Lord just had too much support from middle class and lower wizards and witches looking for a way to strike back at the Ministry, purebloods, and against the rest of the damage that had inflicted upon them in history, all of which were blamed on people with so-called Slytherin qualities. Not only that, but –

“Weasley,” Lucius said, “was the one who led the extermination of my home.”

Harry’s reply never left his mouth. “Your – your home?”

“By Salazar,” Bellatrix snapped, “where have you been living? Under a rock?”

“Miss Black,” Bones called. “Do you have something to say?”

“...No professor.”

“Ten points off Slytherin. And now, as I was saying...”

Ron was the one responsible for destroying Malfoy’s mansion? Harry remembered the newspaper article vividly. That means his parents were kidnapped and he’s homeless. And I just all but said that he had it coming to him. Vaguely, he registered the fact that in any other circumstance, he wouldn’t be feeling all that bad for Malfoy. But here, in this universe, Lucius Malfoy wasn’t an Inner Circle Death Eater. He

wasn't responsible for giving Ginny a horcrux, and he wasn't one of the people who tried to kill him. He was just a seventh year student who may as well have lost his family. Only, unlike Harry, he had the added agony of knowing what he was missing.

Tom wondered exactly what Bella and Lucius were thinking, but decided he probably didn't want to know. He'd been the one who forced Potter on them, and it was clear his presence was going to do a lot of harm before it did any good. It was bad enough that Potter resembled the face in the small, less than ideal photos the Daily Prophet managed to sneak of the Dark Lord. People had already noticed it, or else Potter wouldn't have had half the animosity he did now, despite the fact that he had been sitting with Jasmine and her gang.

Was Potter was relishing the chaos? From the memories he had seen in Dumbledore's penseive, the Gryffindor had been performing vicious pranks with his friends on Slytherins since first year, and it had gotten progressively worse. He glanced to his side. Potter looked almost...guilty. But that was impossible. Potter, feeling remorseful towards a Malfoy? No, it wouldn't happen. Potter would only feel even a hint of that towards his closest friends: Hermione Weasley nee Granger and Ronald Weasley.

In fact, this apparent concern for others was what drew people to Potter in his Hogwarts days. He wasn't the type of person who gathered crowds of admirers. He was the type that gathered a few, but the ones he did would lay down their lives for him. It was what made the Death Eaters, especially the Inner Circle, so dangerous today. They were fanatical in their loyalty to their old school friend and protector.

It was then that Tom was wrenched out of his thoughts. "Dolohov!" Bones screeched like the banshees she had told them about in fifth year. "Is this yours?" She waved a piece of notebook paper in her hand. Marvelous, Tom lamented. Andy's been passing notes again. Bones -

read, “You want Bones to stay away? Try the Patronus Charm. It might ward her off of you’. Are these your words, Dolohov?” Bella made a noise that sounded like the offspring of a gasp and a giggle.

“Yes madam,” Andy quipped, deciding it was useless to deny it. His handwriting was as recognizable to her as we own.

“Detention with Filch,” she seethed and incinerated the paper. Harry heard someone in the back mutter condolences.

Class soon came to an end. They all stood and prepared to leave, but before they could, Potter grabbed Lucius’ shoulder. “Wait.” Tom paused, his hand unconsciously reaching for his wand.

“Yes, James?” Lucius turned, effectively throwing off the hand.

Potter shifted. “I just...well...I...”

“What? Are you here to apologize?”

The mocking tone was not lost on Potter, who flushed. “Yes,” he blurted. As if the word had somehow immobilized all of them, the Slytherins around them froze. “Look, I was being a prick. I didn’t know it was Ron who did...that and, well, I’ve only heard a...a one-sided view of him from the Spanish newspapers so it...well...you know,” he finally mumbled. “So yes. I’m sorry. If I’d known better, I wouldn’t have said what I said.”

Tom was stunned. Potter had actually apologized. But, he insisted, the penseive-! He’s not – he wouldn’t have done that! Potter was prideful. Potter was prejudiced. It didn’t make any sense!

It seemed that he wasn’t the only one surprised that Harry was admitting a mistake. Even if a person was in error, usually their pride interfered, especially for Slytherins, who were prideful creatures by nature. It was even more difficult to do when the argument was a particularly heated of vicious one. But he had put it aside.

Lucius seemed to realize this too. Potter squirmed a moment longer before the blonde simply said, "See that it doesn't happen again" before leaving.

Harry let out a breath that he hadn't even realized he'd been holding. In the corner of his eye, he could swear he could see Bellatrix smiling. Riddle was still rooted in place, looking at him as if Harry had just given birth to a litter of hippogriffs. "No need to gape, Riddle," he muttered and walked out, trying to ignore the stares. For the first time, he started to see these people as separate from the ones he knew.

"So it's the little brat again, ain't it, eh?"

Andy grinned. "Filchy my boy! How's it going?"

The caretaker snarled. "Don't you 'Filchy' me, Dolohov! You ought to be strung up to the ceiling! Dangled by your entrails! Oh if only the Headmaster would let me, I would, I would..."

Andy skimmed the office/storage closet that was Filch's lair. "I see you didn't redecorate since the last time I've been here, have you old pal?"

"The last time you were here," Filch roared, "was three days ago!"

"...Would you believe me if I said I missed you?"

"Little whelp!" Filch shoved him into the rickety old seat in front of his desk. "Now you just-" CRASH! Filch's dirty head leapt up. "What's that noise?" Pause. "Peeves!"

"Tough luck," Andy grinned. "Looks like my homeboy's come to bust me out-"

"Stay here!" Filch snapped. "And if I hear any more Yankee slang come out of your mouth I'll – argh!" He tore out of the room, howling about how Peeves was always making a mess. Andy stood up and stretched. Looks like a good twenty minutes of his detention would be used up. Twenty minutes less of torture.

He looked at the door, debating whether he should just go for a walk for half an hour and come back, but his sense of self-preservation reared its head. He didn't want to risk that homicidal sadist coming back again. Whistling to himself, he peered over Filch's desk. An entire stock of confiscated items was sprawled all over it. No doubt Filch played with them during his free time, the ponce.

Lazily, Andy picked up a few objects before discarding them. A big, spitting fur ball jumped up on the desk. He felt back, knocking over the ink pot all over the place. "Mrs. Norris?" He blinked. The cat yowled. Then, "Look what you did!" He hurriedly whipped out his wand and pointed it to the desk. Everything on it was bathed in ink. He was just about to say the incantation when a piece of paper caught his eye.

There wasn't anything really special about it. It was obviously folded over and over again and probably quite old, but it was absorbing the ink. "What in the world..?" He muttered the spell to clear up the ink and picked it up. "Is that the stupid paper that Jasmine, Lupin, and the Weasleys are always carrying about?" Now that he thought about it, he could remember Filch snatching this thing, whatever it was, away from them when they were planning what he was sure was going to be a prank.

He had no idea what it was for. Maybe it was for passing notes? But the paper was blank, so it didn't make any sense. But on whim, he opened it and dipped a quill in the ink before drawing a big smiley face all over it. "Sorry buddy," he told the sheet of paper, "but I'm stuck in here for an hour and I have nothing better to do."

The smiley faded. He was just about to draw an unflattering rendition of Filch, when the shock of his life occurred. The paper answered.

Something tells me, it mused, that you aren't as happy as your drawing indicates.

Andy stared at it. "Morgana!"



Was this what the 'Awesome' Foursome were doing all along?  
Writing to some piece of paper that wrote back?

What, he quickly wrote, are you?

More than a piece of paper, that's for sure. But let me introduce myself. My name is Harry Potter. And this is the legendary Marauder's Map.

A/N: OK, so I know that this chapter was supposed to be a transition and a "school life" chapter, but taking that into account, was it still interesting? Did you think that Harry's new-ish attitude and apology at the end was realistic? I'm trying to find a balance between Harry's dislike with his realization that the people here are different. What did you think about Ron being called one of Harry's "most brilliant" strategists? And another question I had was who did you think would have/will show who up: Harry or Tom? Did you think that the fact that they were having a competition like that in the first place was something that would realistically happen?

Once again, thanks for reading and giving me feedback!

## Chapter Eight

Harry's footsteps ghosted across the hallways as he walked. He stared blankly ahead, avoiding treacherous strands of moonlight. He hadn't wanted to expose his Invisibility Cloak just yet, but with the trance he seemed to be in, he wished he had brought it.

The boy shook his head, trying to dislodge the memories he's accumulated just moments ago. "The old pureblood families always spawn the next tyrant," Jasmine had shouted in the JAERA meeting. "Give me one example where I'm wrong!" It had gotten worse from there. Harry had expected that the members wouldn't like a lot of the older families. After all, Slytherins fit almost entirely in that category, and they weren't exactly popular. But what they had said sounded almost anti-pureblood. No, in fact, it was anti-pureblood.

Purebloods controlled the Ministry; purebloods went out of their way to make others miserable; purebloods used their money to make sure that they stayed on top. Some of the more vocal members were rambling on with conspiracy stories that no one seemed to want to stop. In fact, they seemed to encourage it.

Harry believed that the Wizarding world needed changes. There were a lot of laws that put muggleborns at a disadvantage, and he remembered in his world that the weight of someone's pocket could do to wonders in swaying the higher ups. He didn't doubt that it was the same in this one.

But this was all just twisted. It sounded like revenge, not a quest for betterment. Who the Hell was the Dark Lord in this dimension? Whoever he was, the way he marketed his campaign sounded a lot like the Muggle fascist leader, Benito Mussolini did. Harry didn't know all that much about non-magical history, but Dudley had been forced to do a research paper on the man, and Harry had been treated to his cousin's whining and tantrums the entire summer it had happened. Naturally, he'd learnt a few things, one of them being that Mussolini specifically targeted the middle and lower classes. To motivate his followers to follow him, he encouraged the desire for revenge on the upper class. This Dark Lord, whoever he was, seemed to be doing the same.

Dodging another strain of silver, he veered away from the hallway to his right, where he could hear someone prowling. Harry strained his ears and immediately heard the dragging, and hobbling of feet and the padding of paws. Filch and Mrs. Norris.

Keeping their location in mind, he avoided them and traveled to the portrait guarding the Head commons. "Liger," Harry deadpanned. A week and a half had passed since his arrival, so it was Jasmine's turn to decide the password. Shaking his head, he stepped inside.

The teen tucked inside the bed sheets gave a violent jerk. Offended by the slight, the sheets decided to play strait-jacket as Tom tossed, mumbling incoherently in his sleep.

My, my, Borgin, this is a pleasant surprise, is it not?

Rivulets of sweat trickled down his face.

Oh? So unhappy to see me? You certainly have an unpleasant manner of greeting your guests...

His scar prickled and Tom frowned as the pain began to seethe.

You disgusting worm! You know why I'm here, filthy Slytherin snake!

At the ferocious roar, Tom bolted up, gasping. The parting gift he had received the night his mother was murdered shrieked and burned. "Not now," he panted as he clapped a hand on top of it. He stumbled out of his bed, struggling to throw on a robe. Vaguely, he registered the fact that Potter wasn't even in his bed and had barely a second to scowl before a whack of rage from the Dark Lord's mind sent him falling on his knees.

I'm not a patient man, Borgin, but I am an 'impulsive' Gryffindor. You wouldn't want me to do something rash now, would you?

Tom grasped the bedpost and dragged himself to his feet, focusing up his buckling Occlumency shields. He had to get to the hospital wing

and tell them what the Dark Lord was doing. Right now, before it got too bad for him to -

Answer me! Crucio!

A scream tore through Tom's throat. Then pain exploded in his jaw. He must have hit the ground. His failing shields weren't enough; the vision unusually powerful. He could hear Borgin's inhuman howls as the Dark Lord laughed, pure, vindictive pleasure soaring through his veins.

Mercifully, the spell ended. But fury replaced delight before Tom could even catch his breath. Shields, shields, he repeated to himself. Don't let him distract you. Keep them up...Blindly, he moved forward, not knowing if he was even going the correct way.

Harry's eyes shot up to the dorm room as he heard the scream. Without thinking, he bolted up the stairs, only to skid to a halt as Riddle crawled out of the door. He stepped back in shock. Riddle glared up at him. Somehow, Harry doubted this was about him being out of bed at such a late hour.

Riddle's face was contorted into an expression of anguish. He doubted the Slytherin even knew he was there. Completely forgetting the fact that this was the junior Dark Lord of all people, Harry hauled him up. "Riddle," Harry searched his face for any sign of recognition, "Riddle!"

"Headmaster," the other boy rasped. "Get...Dumbledore!"

"What? No way, you need to see a healer!"

Another cry; Riddle's legs collapsed beneath him. "Why," he snarled up at him, "do you have to be so. Bloody. Emotional!"

"What?" Harry started, offended. "You're making no sense at all!" Ignoring the accusation, he hooked one of Riddle's arms around his shoulder, forcing him to lean on him, and started down the stairs. But Riddle didn't even seem to be aware of his own body. His hands clawed at his forehead. Harry felt an actual rush of fear kick at him at

the gesture, the gesture that he had always associated with himself, and seemed insane to associate with anyone else. But he couldn't stop the illogical recognition, especially when it started to get worse.

"Damn it Riddle!" he shouted in desperation, "I'm not going to carry you!" He was just about to get them down the last stair when Tom lashed out.

"Stop it! You're hurting him!"

"Riddle!" Harry snatched his wrist before he could fall. "You're delirious! We need to get to the-" he froze. Riddle was facing him again and now that his auburn curls were pasted out of the way, Harry was paralyzed by a frighteningly familiar slight emblazoned on his forehead. "How?" Harry gasped.

Riddle had the scar!

But how? Why?

How did Riddle have the scar?

Another pain-filled groan from the other boy jerked Harry out of his bewilderment. Alright, so Riddle had the scar. It wasn't the pressing matter right now. Harry knew how bad these visions could be and he didn't want to just stand around gaping while someone else suffered through them. Stupefy. The spell snatched Riddle away into unconsciousness. "Mobilicorpus." Of course, now he had just doomed Riddle to experiencing the scar-induced nightmare in all its excruciating glory, but he had little choice.

"Who is the Dark Lord?" Harry demanded of no one in particular. A horrible thought of what the identity could be occurred to him, but it was so awful and completely unbelievable that he shoved it as far as he possibly could from himself the moment he thought it. But Harry felt the blood draining from his face. The lingering doubt was still there. Concentrate, idiot. Get to the Hospital Wing! Taking his own advice, he and the floating Riddle exited the Common room.

Searching around for the passageway he knew was there, Harry checked to see if the coast was clear. Unfortunately, it wasn't.

"What do we have 'ere, Mrs. Norris?" Filch cackled gleefully. "A student, out of bed?" Then the beady eyes swooped over Harry's unofficial cargo. "What the – what have you done, James? Killed a student?" Filch didn't sound the least bit bothered.

Harry groaned. "I don't have time for this!"

"Ha! I'll decide what you have time for, you lil' whelp! Wait till Dumbledore hears about this-!"

Before the unpleasant caretaker could close in on him, Harry tapped the wall with his wand. Filch had a second to be outraged before Harry leapt inside as it swung open. The caretaker's enraged howls chased after him as he skirted through the passageway to the Hospital Wing. Bodiless globs of flames ignited above him, casting light on the congested hall. Ducking a cobweb, he told the unconscious Riddle, "You know, I've always wanted to do that." Naturally, Riddle didn't answer. Instead, he was starting to twitch. Harry winced in sympathy, practically flying down the remaining steps to the end of the passage.

He pushed what appeared to be a dead end and it lurched opened. Harry poked his head out and, after noticing that there were no professors patrolling the premises, brought Riddle out behind him. His memory told him that he only had a few corridors to go before he reached the Hospital Wing. Swiftly, he continued forward, relieved when he saw the entrance.

Unfortunately, it was closed. He rapped on it. Nothing. He banged the handles. "Hello! We need help!" Finally a scuffle came from inside. Harry fidgeted, wondering if this was how Ron and Hermione felt when he was going through the same thing...only less so, since he wasn't exactly best mates with Riddle. "Come on," he muttered. "Hurry up..."

The door was wrenched open, revealing a scowling Madam Pomfrey. "Do you have any idea," she started, "what time-?" Harry pointed over

his shoulder where Riddle was still suspended on an invisible stretcher. "Good Heavens!" she exclaimed. "Come in, come in!"

Rolling his eyes, Harry followed, putting Riddle's prone form on the nearest bed in sight. "It's his scar," Harry explained after Pomfery shot him a suspicious look, obviously suspecting that he had something to do with this. "I didn't know if I could get him here if he was conscious."

"I see. I'm surprised Tom told you about the connection in the scar." Harry voted not to tell her that he didn't. "But no matter, this is a private matter now, Mr. James. So if you please-"

"You want me to leave?" No, he couldn't leave now – he'd just found out that the world was turned upside down!

"Yes, Mr. James. As I said-"

"But I have to ask him some questions!"

"You will do no such thing!"

"But-"

"No, Mr. James. You will not harass my patient! Now, I'm grateful for you bringing him here, but now I need you to leave if you want him to recover properly." Before Harry could object, she waved her wand and the Stunner on Riddle died. Immediately, the formerly unconscious teen opened his eyes, gasping. Pomfery came closer, her eyes softening.

"He – he has them," he gripped Pomfery's arm as soon as she came in range. "Tell – tell the Headmaster – he has them all..." He sank back into the pillow, his eyes closing in exhaustion.

Harry frowned. "What-?"

"Out!"

Scowling, Harry let her eject him from the Hospital Wing, knowing a losing battle when he saw one.

The hotel room watched its occupants silently, its burnt and spell-scarred walls swathed in shadow. Unspeakables' lifeless bodies were strewn across the carpet. Daylight poured through the windows, their glass faces assisting the redhead in peering down at the streets below. His fingers skimming across the chessboard that had been shattered in the recent fray between the three living inhabitants, he picked up a white knight. "White knight," he smirked at it, "forward three."

"The Aurors are moving down Main Street, are they? Fools." His companion eyed the pitiful dump of a man cowering on the floor in front of him. He somersaulted his wand, caught it, and pointed it at the whimpering mess. "Ron, use our precious pawns to jump their flank. Have our other pieces retreat underground."

"Already done, my lord." A malicious gleam ignited in Ron's eyes.

"Y-you, you can't!" the hysterical man stuttered. "L-leave me a-alone!"

"Now, now, Borgin," Hadrian drawled, "you have displeased me. Surely you knew the price of displeasing me, didn't you?"

"I-I d-don't know where it is!"

"Liar." Hadrian's feral golden eyes narrowed. "Crucio!" Borgin screamed, his muscles slamming and bones bruising as his body thrashed against the floor. The sound irritated Hadrian's acute hearing. He cut off the spell. "Feeling more cooperative?"

Borgin panted, his fingers twitching involuntarily, a sure indicator that his frayed nerves were crying in agony. "D-don't know..."

Hadrian let out an impatient sigh. How inconvenient. "Do you and the Cruciatus want another play date together Borgin, or are you ready to tell me where it is?"



"I don't," the Knockturn alley vendor was hysterical, "know! Please! Believe me!"

"Don't lie to me!" the Dark Lord roared. He lashed him with another round of the Unforgivable curse. "You dare keep me from my birth right?! Tell me where it is, you filthy Slytherin spawn! Tell me where my father's invisibility cloak is!"

"I don't know! Argh!"

"You worthless-!"

"No! Aahh! Wait – I know where it is!"

Pause. "You do, do you?" The curse ended.

"Y-yes," Borgin blabbed, "I know...I know not where your father's cloak is-" Hadrian lifted his wand, "-no! Don't your lordship! I know not where that particular cloak is, but I know where what you seek is!"

"I highly doubt that."

"I know! I – I know where Peverell's Cloak is!"

Hadrian froze. "I should kill you for your presumptions, Borgin." He lazily aimed his wand back at the man. "But I won't. The level of outrageousness in your lies intrigues me. Do continue."

"N-not lies, your lordship!" Borgin attempted and failed to gesture at the various racks of cloaks and robes behind him. "M-my best cloak, it is perfect! I know...I know it is the one! It is the final Hallow!"

"Crucio." Raw shrieks pierced the air. "You have the audacity to insult my lineage? Ignotus Peverell's line ends in me! You shall suffer..."

"Hadrian," Ron called as he shut off his cell phone.

"Hm?" the Dark Lord answered distractedly. He was rather busy being amused by the fact that even in his state of continual torture, Borgin still managed to flinch at the sound of his name.

"I've ordered our pawns to portkey away – dead initiates clog up the place. Anti-apparation wards are up. As predicted, they're making an encirclement. Hermione estimates them to surround this hotel," he waved a hand to encompass the room they were in, "in about three minutes."

"How quaint. I take it her division and Neville's are in position?"

"That's right mate. Standing by for your order."

"Excellent. We shall be done here soon." Hadrian turned his attention back to Borgin, who was prattling incoherently. "Useless." He strongly suspected these were the cowardly falsifications of desperate prey, but the notion had merit. Weeks ago, he had assembled all the Hallows. Or thought he had. The Elder Wand and the Resurrection Stone were easy to distinguish. But the Cloak...that was more difficult.

He strode across the fallen man, growling at the bodies in his way. "These Unspeakable corpses' make such a mess on the floor. I don't know why our Knockturn snake here thought they would protect him from me. As if the Ministry could keep me from my own inheritance..." A chuckle from the redhead told him that he agreed. The Ministry officials were imbeciles.

A metal safe was knocked on its side on the table. Hadrian glanced at his victim and then at the combination dial. "Don't worry, Borgin," he smiled broadly, "I won't sully my mind with your own. You don't deserve Legilimency." He grabbed the handle and yanked. Metal screeched as it was torn from its place. Hadrian ripped the remaining pieces of the door off its hinges and discarded them on the ground.

A silvery cloak was lying in the safe's mouth. The Dark Lord snatched the fabric. It was an invisibility cloak for sure. But was it the correct one? He was certain that the one he had used weeks ago to unlock the Hallows, the one he thought was his cloak, was the correct one.

He refused to believe that his cloak wasn't once Ignotus Peverell's as well. The stories his father had told him in the little time he lived seemed to confirm that his cloak was special. Hermione had also,

though grudgingly, come around to believe that if any cloak was to be the legendary Hallow they were searching for, it would be his.

But there were no initials on the cloak he had used in the ceremony to unlock the Hallows, nothing to mark it as truly his father's, though he thought it was. And of course, his cloak wasn't given to him immediately after his parents were murdered by Grindelwald's forces. He had recovered it after his Hogwarts days. It was possible that he currently had the wrong cloak, wasn't it? A small chance, but it was still there. Perhaps this was the Potter cloak instead.

He supposed he would just have to have Luna had test this one's properties as a Will member herself.

"Well Borgin," he said slowly, "you haven't been very helpful, have you? Running from the Wizarding world, having the audacity to hide from me, avoiding my followers, irritating them with your inevitably ineffectual bodyguards...what would you say your punishment should be?" Hadrian crouched down with a liquid grace until he was all but whispering in Borgin's ear. "I dislike torture, really, I do. So cruel. So very cruel. But what else can I do, if you refuse to oblige me? When you attempt to steal my birthright? Ah...I know." Hadrian stood, towering above him. His eleven inch wand snapped in position over Borgin's heart. "I shall just kill you." Borgin's eyes didn't even have time to widen before the swoop of unseen wings soared out of Hadrian's wand and blinding green light punched through his chest. He fell with a dull thump.

The Dark Lord examined his new prize. "Is this it?" he wondered quietly. "Will this little trinket give me the power I seek? The ability to snatch the dead out of Death's own home - the ability to travel there and back? A careless smile curved his lips.

"Attention!" an amplified voice shouted from outside on the street. Hadrian raised an eyebrow. "This is the DMLE – we have the building surrounded! Come out and place your weapons on the ground. I repeat, come out and place your weapons on the ground."

"Posturing for the Muggles, are they?"

"I'd say so," Ron leered at them. The Aurors were dressed in uniforms similar to those of policemen in an attempt to blend in with the surrounding area. Any Muggle bystanders would assume that the DMLE was some special police force that they hadn't heard about.

Several squads of battle-hardened law enforcers were stationed around the building, their wands raised and muscles taut. They'd heard the stories. They'd seen proof of them. The fact that there were only two Dark wizards in that Muggle hotel was irrelevant. It may as well have been an army.

"I think they've just about sealed off every exit point," Ron remarked.

"Do they plan to storm the place, I wonder?"

"I'd bet. Won't take them long to get impatient. They think they've got us."

Hadrian murmured, "Simple-minded purebloods...they know nothing of Muggle cities." His inky robes swished as he turned and exited the room, his smirking subordinate in tow. Hadrian flicked his wand and the elevator opened. The two stepped inside, ignoring the saxophone music crooning above them, entirely inappropriate for the occasion.

"So," Ron glanced at his lord, "what do you plan to do?" It was the infamous question that resulted in the deaths of hundreds. Ron was a strategist; years of playing his favorite game had made it easy for him to predict the enemy's moves and create his own. But chess wasn't the same as real life - Hadrian's outside of the box creativity more than made up for that.

"Simple Ron, simple. I plan to call checkmate." He flicked his own cell phone open and dialed. Hermione's voice crackled to life. Technomagic wasn't perfect yet, after all. Then came Neville's. "I trust everything has gone as predicted?"

"Yes, my lord," Neville answered humbly. "My division has circled underground, as per your request."

Hermione answered, "Mine as well." Hadrian could hear the eerie dribble of underground sewage water in the background. "But this place is unseemly, my lord!"

The Dark Lord chuckled. "Almost there, Hermione. Wait just a moment." The elevator stopped at the lobby. Both he and Ron stepped out, their eyes drawn to the mass of Aurors piling behind the windows. "And now we begin. Have everyone blast the ceilings and supports, directing towards the center." At the affirmative, he shut off the phone and looked at Ron. "I think it's only polite to wave goodbye, don't you?"

Carelessly brushing a hand through his untamable hair, the Dark Lord watched as the ground beneath the Aurors began to tremble. Distant explosions burst around the building; cracks streaked forward, tearing beneath the Ministry's law enforcers. The cascade effect was devastating.

Muggles screamed. Wizards panicked.

Ron laughed. The Aurors yelled and scrambled out of their formerly impenetrable ranks, but it was too late. The ground collapsed beneath them, sending them plummeting below and smashing into the sewage, wires, and floor.

Dust hacked into the air. Hadrian somersaulted his wand again. Every Auror surrounding the building – every Auror that had been sent – was buried in the rubble, any visible limbs and bones snapped at sharp, unnatural angles.

"Another victory to the Black King," Ron smirked, indulging in the chess terminology the Inner Circle had adopted as code names. The anti-apparation wards died. Whoever had cast them must have just met a similar fate. "How'd you know that the floor beneath us wouldn't collapse either?"

"Muggle buildings have floors independent from their streets." Hadrian was slightly amused at how little concern was in the question. "Let us leave. These unwise Aurors were not even worth the energy it took to kill them. They are outdated. Insipid. Chained in old ways. If

they had any sense of the future, they wouldn't have expected us to use such trite battle tactics as charging out. In short, a boring game to play." A lopsided smile tugged on his lips.

"Tell Hermione and Neville to meet me back at headquarters, Black Rook." Throwing the invisibility cloak over one arm, Hadrian apparated away without even a glance back at the carnage.

A/N: Almost three weeks since the last update...I want to say sorry, but the truth is that now that I've started school and those "amazing" college applications, updates are going to be slow. I'm aiming for once every two weeks, but they might come out later :( Well, for anyone who's interested in commenting for this chapter, I was wondering, first off, if you thought I described the pain from the scar well - or if it was just too over the top, etc. What do you think about Hadrian's personality? I know it's only been a chapter, but could you see some of our Harry in him? Does Hadrian seem "dark lordy" or does he need to be darker? Ron calls Hadrian, well, Hadrian - did you expect him to be more like Voldemort's characters, who can't call him by name? Any other comments?

Thanks for reading!

## Chapter Nine

“Back from the dead, Tom?”

Tom groaned and peeled his eyelids open. Wait, was he in the Hospital Wing? One look at that annoyingly familiar ceiling gave him his answer. For a moment, he couldn't recall just what he had gone through this time to earn a sentence in this purgatory, but then he remembered.

Oh yes, he almost rolled his eyes, once again I've been treated to this week's episode of The Dark Lord's Life. How invigorating. Five stars. “Inconsiderate, emotional Dark Lord,” he muttered to himself. He swore that Hadrian was bipolar. Either he was so completely, utterly furious that the scar sent Tom in spasms of pure anguish, or he was so ridiculously pleased that he had another round of said spasms. It didn't help that he had a quick, foul temper either.

Gryffindors, he scowled. “What time is it?”

“If you hurry, you'll just be able to make it for breakfast,” she smiled.

Tom braced himself for pain as he began to sit up and was astonished when he didn't keel over from the usual aftermath of his nemesis' tantrums.

Pomfrey noticed. “You have your new friend to thank for that. I must say, you gain them quickly. You're lucky that Mr. James was so knowledgeable in what to do in this situation. It makes me wonder how he knew...” Tom has already stopped listening when he realized that the healer had just said that Potter had helped him. More horrifying revelations drew his attention back. “He was standing around the door for an entire hour before I had to chase him away. He brought you all the way up here from such a long distance. You have a loyal one in him.”

If Tom hadn't been seething with humiliation from the knowledge that Potter had not only seen him in this vulnerable state, but rescued him, he would have snorted. Then a thought occurred to him.

The toad – it was about the right time..! Had he missed the crucial moment-?

“...I think I have to revise my view of him,” she chattered on. “I must confess, his appearance to You–Know–Who made me biased. But then again, he also bears a striking to resemblance to Mr. Potter. A fine boy, that-”

“Madam Pomfrey-”

“Poppy, dear. We’ve known each other too long for all that.”

Tom climbed out of the hospital bed. Casting one of his disarming smiles that melted professors across the board, he asked, “Poppy, do you think I could leave now?”

The toad issue was just something he would have to deal with at the soonest possible moment. Besides, none of the teachers had been hovering over him in the hospital, demanding to know what exactly it was that Potter had found hatching in his dorm last night. He shuddered. That must have meant that it hadn’t happened. Potter would have ratted him out for sure.

“Of course dear. But make sure to take this before you go.” Tom glanced at the bottle she was giving him. It looked like a mixture of several potions. “Mr. James prescribed this,” she answered his questioning frown. Tom immediately resolved to never let that concoction or Potter’s ever touch his mouth. “Judging from the success of the rest of suggestions, I’d take his advice.”

When Hell freezes over, he vowed. “Did Evander say what was inside it?” He had to be congenial after all, and make her think that he’d take it as soon as he walked out. Then he could hurl the thing as far away as humanly possible.

“He said that it was a blend of a mild Calming Draught, Headache Potion, and, for some reason, a potion that is usually used to repair damage from legilimency attacks.”



The Slytherin felt his blood ice. How did Potter know about the scar connection? Granted, Hadrian had figured it out in time for the fiasco at the Department of Mysteries, but his memories had been completely muddled. He thought he was the Boy Who Lived, for goodness sake! And that year...that year that damnable so-called Black Bishop, that unfeeling Weasley woman, killed Bella's father.

It was true that Cygnus Black wasn't completely supportive of Tom because of his half-blood status in the beginning, but in the end he had won him over. He was practically a father to him, especially considering the fact that his biological 'father' loathed him in every sense of the word.

Tom wiped away the memory and thoughts of The Man Who Gave Me Life But Isn't My Father away before he could found himself wallowing like he had the entire end of fifth year and the beginning of sixth.

Poppy had placed the bottle in his hands.

Oh, it was tempting, so very tempting. And the fact that Poppy was the one who had mixed it together proved that it was safe. But Potter was the one who suggested it, his pride protested. Potter. Potter! You can't accept something from Potter...

Tom decided that his pride could rot. He downed the drink and instantly a cool, refreshing wave relaxed the tension in his muscles and diminished the pounding in his head. But before he could go completely insane and start feeling grateful, he bid Poppy goodbye and strode out the door.

The walk down to the Great Hall was almost as unpleasant as his episode last night. Was he supposed to thank Potter? Surely not. Surely Potter didn't think he would. Surely he didn't think he deserved one...it was just one potion, wasn't it? Yes, it was possibly the most relieving potion he had ever taken, but it was just a potion. It wasn't as if he gave him access to his Gringotts' account. And Lucius had helped him to the Hospital Wing plenty of times. It wasn't anything special. Who cared if Potter, especially Potter, could have just left him there? He probably just 'helped' him to gain gloating rights afterwards,

or procure a debt. Yes, that was it. A debt. It wasn't something that Gryffindors did, but surely they did it occasionally? Yes. It made sense. Loads of sense! Plenty of sense! And the potion...and the potion...he just...he gave it to him because he wanted to make him feel guilty – to make him answer questions!

That was it – Potter would have questions for him! He had seen the scar. Tom was sure of it. Dread coiled in his stomach. Could Potter have figured it out? He thought he was the Boy Who Lived, after all – as absurd an idea as it was – and he had mentioned over the week that the world was practically a complete opposite. From Tom's scar vision, he knew that Potter wasn't the same as Hadrian for certain.

But still, what if Potter realized that if Tom, who still appeared to be Potter's nemesis in his world/delusional mind, was the Boy Who Lived here, and Tom had made it clear that he held no love for Potter either, that the only way Potter would still be his nemesis would be if he was...

"That isn't going to happen," he asserted. If Potter got close to the truth, he'd ridicule him, or do something else that would distract him from the truthful conclusion. They couldn't risk Potter finding out. How would he react? He might skip right off to join his Dark Lord counterpart, or whatever his relation was, in his megalomaniacal plans for complete hegemony over Britain, if not the entire world.

Straightening, Tom passed through the doors and headed towards the Slytherin table, noticing the sick looks etched on everyone's faces. And no, it wasn't an epidemic; it was this morning's paper. Frantic whispers skittered across the Hall, the Slytherins looking the worst. The Gryffindors, on the other hand, were looking absurdly proud of themselves, as if this chaos was all somehow their doing and they were reveling in it. Jasmine & Co. were doing some sort of gross reenactment of how they thought it played out.

It was disgusting. Don't they know this isn't a game? But he bet they did but didn't care. Practically all the Gryffindors were fanatically loyal to their leader. Potter's physical resemblance had been earning him speculative looks since his arrival from those of Lion's den whose parents, and thus them, had been privy to the Dark Lord's

appearance. He'd noticed the way Jasmine and Lupin watched Potter and it made Tom anxious.

He guessed that especially after this new development, Potter's popularity would either soar or dive. The public had never seen a clear close up picture of Hadrian. The tiny blurred ones that had been captured showed a profile that could easily be seen as Potter's. Many people tended to focus on the measly images, probably with the same morbid fascination that forced Muggles to watch horror movies or wizards to seek out Dark magic. But all of this still left it relatively safe for Potter to traipse about Hogwarts. People might be momentarily confused, wondering where they had seen him before, or slightly startled, but nothing significant.

What really would cause a reaction was if someone from the students' parents' generation saw him. Hadrian enjoyed charging out into the front lines. He was infamous for it. Many adults would recognize Potter in an instant.

The Gryffindors, with the exception of one or two, loved him for it. They saw their lord in him. A large majority of the Hufflepuffs did as well, along with about a quarter to a half of Ravenclaw. Any Slytherins who actually supported him, a breed that Tom believed existed only in myth, had too much of a desire for self-preservation to appear anything less than resentful. Potter was a painful reminder to the rest of the House.

The whole table was buried in Daily Prophets. Some students were pale, others a blazing crimson, and a couple weren't even present – they had probably lost family members in the attack. Ever since Hadrian had risen, there had been more traditionally Slytherin families joining the Aurors, hoping for the honor of fighting for their way of life.

But where was Potter?

The Headmaster was talking to his staff, revealing nothing. Another feeling of trepidation reared inside him, but he squashed the feeling and marched towards the table.

Lucius, who was violently cutting up his French toast and pointedly ignoring the article, was the first one to notice his arrival. "Are you feeling better?"

"Better than usu-" Then he remembered Potter and the potential thank you the admission would imply. He veered away from the word. "I'm fine."

Bella noticed next. "Tom! Are you alright?" Her wide eyes implored him to tell her the truth. Luckily, Lucius saved him.

"Bella, do try not to frighten him. There isn't much point dragging you away from the Hospital Wing if you're going to harass him here."

Bella turned his toast vomit green before turning back to Tom. Lucius looked blatantly disturbed. "Well?"

"I'm fine," Tom waved it off. Somewhere nearby, someone cursed the newspaper article once again. No one was brave enough to actually curse the Dark Lord, after all, so they had to settle for the next best thing. Aside from that, Weasley was one of them. Apparently the Prophet had managed to get something right for once. Weasley was seen in the hotel as well.

"What was this about?" Lucius asked quietly. His voice was speared with an undercurrent of hatred directed at the Dark Lord's right hand man. "Why were they there? The article wouldn't say."

"Borgin." Tom's face was grim. "He...he has it." His two closest friends understood immediately. "Unspeakables were guarding him, but as you can see..." he gestured to the paper.

"Tom," Bella whispered, "does this mean that he has all three? That he is now – you know?"

Tom was about to answer when Andy cut in. "What are you three mumbling about?" He leaned forward and grinned. "Enough of this sad stuff. I've got-"

“What do you mean ‘enough of this sad stuff’? The Dark Lord just murdered about a hundred Aurors at once! He didn’t even use his wand! He was just waving sayonara as they plummeted to their deaths! And the city – the city is in shambles!”

For once, Lucius’ perfect composure cracked. “Curse him! Curse him and his unconventional, unpredictable, mass-murdering tactics!” More than half of those who heard were shocked, whether from the fact that Lucius had actually dared to curse the Dark Lord or from the fact that the outburst was so uncharacteristic, it was hard to tell.

Both Bella, Tom, and Andy knew that Lucius was thinking about how the Dark Lord had his family locked up somewhere with him. He had no idea where they were or what had happened to them. In some ways, it was worse not knowing. “Just trying to alleviate the pressure, Bella,” Andy muttered after he recovered from surprise. “You know I’m not being serious...” Bellatrix arched an eyebrow imperiously and turned away. “Well anyway, about Evander...” The three looked blankly at him.

“Evander?” Tom repeated.

“Subtle change of topic, Antonin. Very subtle.”

“No need to praise me buddy,” Andy grinned, sliding between him and Bellatrix, who was still giving him the evil eye. “I was just wondering...what’s his middle name?”

“His...his middle name?”

“Yeah.”

“Why’d you want to know that?”

“Yes, Dolohov,” Bella drowned him in a glower, “why would you need to know something so random?”

Andy stared at her. “What’s gotten into you?”

“Oh? You’re pretending you don’t know are you?”

“Not pretending. I seriously don’t know!”

“Fine then,” she crossed her arms, “let me enlighten you. Today you called me a ‘slimy Slytherin spawn’ as I was walking out of the common room! Why would you even say something like that? You’re a Slytherin yourself!” Any of the Slytherins who weren’t mourning the news given by the Prophet watched the exchange with interest.

Andy blinked. “Would you believe me if I told you I don’t remember ever saying that?”

“No,” she replied coolly.

“Sorry,” he apologized. “Seriously, I don’t. Now that I think about it though, I don’t remember a lot of things these days. But I’m sorry anyway.” His uncharacteristic frown transformed into a grin. “Probably went to Hogsmead with my new toy and drank too many firewhiskeys!”

“That would explain it – wait, firewhiskeys? You’re not even of age yet!”

“What is this new toy of yours, Antonin?” Lucius interrupted before Bellatrix could continue.

Andy was almost bouncing. “This Lucy, is my new best friend.” With a flick of his wand the table contents moved to the side. He slapped down and unraveled a blank piece of paper. “Sorry guys, but you’re out of that job. Meet the Marauders’ Map!”

“Marauders’ Map’?”

“What on earth is that?”

Lucius peered down at it. “Impressive, Antonin. A blank sheet of paper. I must applaud you.”

“Don’t rule it out just yet guys.” Clearing his throat dramatically, he announced, “I solemnly swear I’m up to no good.” Jet black ink welled

out of the Map until lines crisscrossed throughout it, exposing the Great Hall's layout for all to see.

"That's quite brilliant." Riddle's eyebrows rose. "It shows everyone here." Maybe it will tell me where 'Evander' is. I'll have to borrow it some time.

"So about Evander," Andy brought them back, "what's his middle name?"

"Why would any of us know something like that?"

"You might." They looked at Tom.

He sighed. What had Potter invented again? Ah yes. "Not that I see how this is relevant, but his middle name is Harrison. Why?"

"My friend in the Map wants to know. Said he might know him." He shrugged.

"Friend'?" Riddle inquired.

"There's five. Padfoot, Moony, Wormtail, Prongs, and Saber." At the three incredulous expressions, he shrugged. "Beats me. They all have codenames for each other. It helps with pranking – it's what they used the Map for."

"Which one wanted to know more about Evander?" Tom asked, fingering the Map. It was a clear testimony to the creators' abilities, whoever they were. At the same time though, the idea of a talking Map was almost as bizarre as Potter's alternate universe theory.

"Saber," Andy supplied. "He's the only one that really talks. I only know about the rest from him and because they introduced the map and took credit for making it."

"...Are you saying this 'Saber' character really talks to you?"

"Sorta. I write something and he writes back. He's been showing me how to use the Map. I think I'll give the quartet over there a run for

their money,” he smirked. “It was originally theirs, after all. Let’s see how they like their own weapon used against them!”

Tom’s skin crawled. The whole idea of a talking...parchment disturbed him. Stop being paranoid, he reprimanded himself. There’s nothing to worry about. After all, if Jasmine & Co. used it for so long, it couldn’t be cursed. After all, they are, regrettably, not falling over and dying. But still, he had to ask. “Andy,” he started. The boy looked up. “Are you sure it’s safe? You don’t know what it is.”

“You worry too much, Tom,” Andy waved it off. “Seriously. Kids have toys that are enchanted to talk to them. Why’s this any different? Granted, Saber is much smarter, but still. That just means that his maker was good really good at Charms if he could perverse his personality like this.”

“I suppose...” Wizards did have interesting toys, after all. He’d walked past a few shops selling them and seen it for himself. But Andy would know better than he would about magical childhoods; Tom hadn’t grown up in one.

“Class in five minutes,” Bella commented.

Where was Potter? He couldn’t just go and look for the Gryffindor – he had class himself. Potter better not be skipping...what could he possibly be doing?

Splash! Greedy mud suckled on Harry’s boots as he hunted around the Quidditch pitch, scanning for bugs. “Argh,” he yanked his foot out. The mud cursed him as he made his escape. “Why do these things always have to happen to me?”

“Hungry,” the bundle tucked in his arms whined, its damp, scrawny wings flopping uselessly. “Food!”

Sighing, Harry readjusted the invisibility cloak, making sure that it veiled them both. “You’ll get food soon,” he hissed in Parseltongue. “Just wait.” Once again, why did these things happen to him? Life just had to throw every little plot twist its sadistic mind could come up with in his path, didn’t it?



"Yes mommy."

"I'm not your 'mommy'!"

"Yes!" The...thing insisted. Quite adamantly, he had to add. "Are!"

Harry glanced down at it. He wasn't exactly sure what it was, and the Thing had just been born a few hours ago, so its speech wasn't exactly advanced enough to tell him. Whatever it was, it looked a lot like some sort of chicken/snake hybrid. Trust Riddle to breed something as outrageous as that in his dorm. He had no doubt that whatever it was, the Thing was illegal.

At least it solved the mystery of why he had a pet toad, of all things.

After Harry had been kicked out of the Hospital Wing, he had made his way back into the Head Commons and just sat there, drowning in his own thoughts, for hours.

That horrible voice that had been haunting Harry ever since he had seen Riddle's scar had spoken up again, oozing over his skin like oil. Ah, but it makes perfect sense if your theory is true, doesn't it?

Shut up! Harry had thought frantically.

It had laughed and sneered, Does the truth hurt, Evander?

You're wrong. But the annoying voice hadn't stopped plaguing him.

Am I? It makes perfect sense. Tom is the Boy Who Lived. And you – what does that make you? Well, obviously, that makes you the –

Shut up! He had barely restrained himself from screaming! But it made so much sense. It took until two in the morning before he could finally admit the validity of what that horrible voice was saying. He just needed confirmation – at that point, he just wanted the truth.

Riddle wouldn't tell him the truth if he asked, but perhaps Dumbledore would. Harry had been tempted to barge into the Headmaster's office

immediately, but instead forced himself to head upstairs. If he was the Dark Lord, Dumbledore would hardly take his surprise visit as a positive.

He'd probably think I was trying to jump him in his sleep, Harry reflected darkly. He had resolved to skip classes the next morning, though that resulted in nightmares of Hermione chasing him about lecturing him about the importance of school work. But he just couldn't bring himself to care. He could be the bloody Dark Lord, for Heaven's sake! He had so find a way back to his world – now!

It was at around nine o'clock that something woke Harry up after sentencing himself to the torture of sleep deprivation. Riddle's toad was going berserk and a soft hissing was bleating from the corner. After loathing the fact that the sun had even dared to rise this morning, Harry rolled over. To his astonishment, the Thing was panting on the cushion that had previously been the toad's territory. Said toad was now rejoicing at its new found freedom from incubating the egg, and sliming the carpet. Harry had ignored it and scrambled toward the wet, scaled Thing, which, after seeing Harry, had proclaimed him his mother and renewed its attempts to extricate itself from its egg shell.

Now, Harry was dumped with the duty of finding the Thing food. Due to one of the Dursleys' more humane techniques of 'normalizing' him, Harry new from National Geographic that chickens were omnivores, and ate small insects and lizards just as much as bread and grain. Snakes enjoyed mice and small mammals as well as crickets and insects.

Harry pried one of the bat-like wings from the Thing's back. The Thing craned its long, snake-like yet slightly feathered neck up at him in question. Was it his imagination, or did he get a headache whenever it looked at him? Harry shook off the thought. The Thing looked like a long snake with bat wings, a sparse amount of feathers on its neck, a beak, and chicken legs. Judging from that, Harry assumed that foods common to both chickens, snakes, and possibly bats, would be safe for it to eat.

"Food?"

“...No. Just poking you...”Harry muttered. The Quidditch stands loomed above the two. Harry swore he could see a small cloud of gnats buzzing around in the shadows. “Accio gnats!”He grinned. A stream of the things zipped towards him. “Here you go,” Harry told Riddle’s bizarre biology project. Blinking, it turned and snapped up the insects, ruffling its wings in pride at its achievement.

“More!”it ordered.

“Your wish is my command.” A smile tugging his lips, Harry started looking around for more of the Thing’s lunch. It buried its head in the crook of Harry’s arm, swishing its tail contentedly. “I really should come up with a name for you,” he told it. “But then again, you are Riddle’s. What would Riddle call you?”Almost instantly the image of Voldemort’s scaly familiar flashed in his mind. “Well. I guess that settles it. For now, you’re going to have to be Nagini.”Nagini’ only buried its head deeper. “Yes, I thought it was a horrible name, too. You know, I looked it up once. All I can say is that Voldemort is very creative – he named his cobra, ‘cobra’.”

Harry doubted ‘Nagini’ had any idea of what he was even talking about. Shrugging, he turned back to the pitch. A flicker of white drew his eye. Something was moving around the stands. “What is that?”he wondered to himself. He squinted his eyes, having gotten rid of his glasses just today. They were doing more harm than good at this point, after all.

The figure seemed to be floating. Was it a ghost? Harry marched two steps at a time over towards the apparition, deciding to find out. As he came closer, it became clear that it was a ghost, though he had no idea which ghost it was. He would have remembered one that haunted the Quidditch pitch, considering the fact that he’d been playing on the team for years.

“Hey!”Harry called. The ghost didn’t answer. “Hey!”

“Hungry,” Nagini complained.

“Just wait a while. And don’t speak!” Harry poked his head out of the invisibility cloak as the ghost whirled around, eyeing him suspiciously. “Excuse me, but-”

“What do you want?” The ghost crossed his arms. “Come to chase me away? Come to lecture me about distracting the players again? Well, I’m not going!”

Harry blinked. “No, actually. I’m just new here, and I was wondering...”

“Yeah?”

“Sorry. I was just wondering,” there really was no nice way to ask, “who you are, exactly? My name is Evander, by the way.” He came to a stop near the translucent spirit. A chill ran down his spine. His face looked familiar, and Harry had the impression that if he studied it for a just a few more seconds, he would recognize him.

“That’s a new one!” the ghost laughed harshly. “Don’t know you I am – what rubbi..!” Suddenly, the ghost stopped, his mouth dropping open. He stared for half a minute before gasping, “Harry?”

Harry jerked back. “No, my name – my name’s Evander!” How does he know me?

“Harry!” the ghost exclaimed in glee, not hearing him at all. He made to grasp Harry’s shoulders, but pulled back at the last minute, disappointment skirting across his face. “Sorry, I forget I’m, well, dead, you know? But Harry - where’ve you been? I knew you’d come back – Hogwarts just isn’t the same without you!”

“W-wha-?”

“I wish I had my camera, but you know, being dead and all, I couldn’t take it with me – really, there hasn’t been another seeker like you for decades! Would ya sign an autograph for me, Harry?”

“Um, I think there’s been a mistake,” Harry started shakily. “My name is Evander. I’m new-”

“Come on, Harry, you remember me, don’t you? Colin Creevy!” Harry’s eyes widened as Colin’s darkened. “But I suppose it’s Creeping Creevy now, isn’t it? But you’ll keep them away, won’t you? They’ll listen to you...they always listen to you...”

Blood rushed to his ears. His heart beat roared in his head. “Colin...Creevy...”

“Yes,” Colin beamed, and Harry noticed that even in this dimension, the former photographer was still staring at him almost worshipfully. “See? You do remember! I knew you would! You would call me my name. You’re always such a good Gryffindor...”

“Colin,” Harry tried not to let his jumbled emotions show, “I’ve got to go now, but maybe I’ll see you later?”

“Oh. Sure.” Colin’s face fell. “Come back soon! I’ll make sure to talk to the Gryffindor captain for you. It would be so great if you would play again! Maybe I can get my old camera back...”

“Yeah, I’ll see you later,” Harry gulped. He tore down the stands, ignoring Nagini’s wails for more food, threw the cloak over them, and burst back into the castle. Dumbledore, he had to see Dumbledore!

“Mommy...”

“I’m not your mommy,” Harry objected half-heartedly. Hesitantly, he stroked its head.

He should tell Dumbledore about Nagini. It was obviously illegal. His more cunning side whispered that the doubt it would shed on Riddle would serve to boost Harry’s pathetically low trust in his Dumbledore’s eyes. Lingering vindication coaxed him to do it, too.

But Harry pushed them both away. Although a part of him laughed at the thought, he decided he was going to keep Riddle’s dirty little secret. The Slytherin hadn’t exactly been a saint, but if Harry’s theory was correct – Harry paled at the thought – then he understood why he did it. He wasn’t exactly finding it easy to live with his parent’s

murderer either, despite the fact that he knew they weren't one and the same.

With new resolution, Harry strode towards the kitchens, which were on the way, and recovered an eagerly given bread loaf from the house elves before going back up to his dorm. He tore the bread pieces up into small pieces and fed a couple of them to Nagini. "I'm going to go now," he told it as it gobbled up a piece. Nagini stopped and hissed mournfully. "I'll come back."

"Back?"

"Yes. I'll come back. Just stay here...and if another boy, a speaker, comes in, don't be afraid. He's your real mother."

"No!"

Harry had no idea whether it was objecting to the fact that he was going or the fact that he was denying being its mother, but either way, he placated, "I'll be back soon." Nagini looked disgruntled, but grudgingly returned to its feast. Harry briefly wondered what gender it was before deciding that neither of them would be able to tell him. Nagini was too young to know what the difference between males and females were, and Harry doubted that turning it over would do him any good. What was a snake supposed to look like under there?

Don't think about that! Agh.

Wiping off the disturbing thought, Harry discarded the cloak and started towards Dumbledore's office. If he was right, he'd already missed two classes today, and his record wasn't going to be getting any better. He probably would have been in Charms right now.

Glad that no one else was wondering about and ignoring the disapproving portraits, he made his way to the gargoyle. The statue stared back defiantly. "Alright," Harry said. "We can either do this the hard way, or the easy way. Easy way: you let me in. Hard way: I guess all the sweets under this earth until I get the right one, and I assure you, I will. I know my sweets." The gargoyle didn't look

intimidated. "Fine," Harry grumbled. "Licorice wands! Chocolate frogs, cockroach cluster! Lemon drops-" The gargoyle jumped to the side.

Mildly surprised that he had gotten it right so quickly, Harry mumbled to himself, "His favorite this time, is it?" Shaking his head, he dashed inside. Wondering just how he was going to bring this up, he stopped in front of the doors, not surprised when they opened themselves as he came close. The headmaster sat behind his desk, his hands gathered in front of him.

"Come in Mr. Potter."

Harry stepped into the office, his heart stabbing his chest. "I needed to ask you a question."

Dumbledore's eyebrows rose. He was watching Harry with something close enough to be labeled wariness. With overtones of curiosity. "Please do." Harry noticed the aged knuckles tightening almost imperceptibly.

Slowly, he walked toward the headmaster's desk and sank into the chair opposite him. "I need to know..." he took a breath, "am I the Dark Lord?"

Dumbledore didn't even hesitate. "Mr. Potter, what would give you such an idea?"

Harry hasn't missed the tiny twitch that the headmaster had given at the question. Along with improved eyesight, it seemed he picked up on motions he would have missed before much more easily. "Don't lie to me. Please. I need to know."

"Mr. Potter..."

"Just tell me!" Harry gave birth to a never before seen crossbreed between a demand and a plea. "Look, I can't deny the evidence, and I just want a truthful answer. For once!"

Dumbledore's face never changed from politely interested. "Tell me what has led you to this conclusion."

Harry closed his eyes. Alright, if this is the game he wanted to play, then he'd play it. "Did Tom tell you about my alternate universe theory?" Dumbeldore smiled indulgently. "Right. I guess not," Harry muttered, feeling foolish. Great. Now he would look even more foolish by explaining his theory in person. At least if The Great Tom Riddle had said it, the absurdity would be distilled. "Well, that's what I think."

"That you've been transported to an alternate universe?"

"Yes. That's what I think." His face exploded into a volcano spawning ground.

"I see. Have you any incontrovertible evidence?"

Harry decided to take it as a good thing that he hadn't burst out laughing in his face yet. "Er, well, everything's different..." Excellent proof, Potter. Excellent. For goodness sake, step it up! "Why don't I just tell you how I got here in the first place? I mean, I don't exactly know all the details, but maybe you know a spell that would make it all fit..?"

"Very well. How did you get here Mr. Potter?"

Harry straightened. "Right. So I'd just gotten back from...doing stuff," Dumbledore's eyes narrowed but he pretended not to notice, "when I started hearing what sounded like a fight outside."

"And where were you when this was happening?"

"Privet Drive," Harry responded, slightly surprised that he didn't know before he remembered that this Dumbledore wouldn't know. "I live with my aunt, uncle, and cousin."

"Ah."

"I went outside and my friend, Luna, she thought I was responsible for doing something. Something about unlocking Hallows...I didn't know what she meant."



Suddenly Dumbledore leaned forward. "Hallows? You said she mentioned 'unlocking' the Hallows?" Harry could see possibilities flitting through his mind at breakneck speed and was both amazed and ecstatic that the man was actually taking this seriously!

"Yeah, but I have no idea what she meant. She said that I was unlocking the Hallows and something about me needing to go through first. I didn't understand that at the time, but it must mean that the other me was trying to go through – he must have been unlocking the Hallows! And then, if I had to go first..." he trailed off. Luna had shoved him into this messed up universe. She must have had some reason for it. His fingers climbed over the necklace she had given him. The girl had told him that it would bring him back. That meant that she must have thought he could easily return. She obviously didn't think that any of this would be that bad. "It must have been a last resort."

"The Hallows..." Dumbledore murmured, a sound that most people would find inaudible. He stared silently ahead for a moment, dwelling on whatever it was he was thinking of. Harry shifted in his seat. Finally, he spoke. "Did she mention anything else?"

"Um...I don't think – wait. Yeah. She mentioned something about Pervell – Parvell-"

"Peverell?" the headmaster supplied.

"Yes! That was it. Something about this Peverell guy's will."

Dumbledore's mind raced. Pieces of the puzzle were clicking together. But could this be another falsification? The Hallows existed. He himself had owned the Elder Wand right until Hadrian had taken it from him last year. There were many myths about them, but the legend about the cult calling itself the Will of Peverell was the only one that had much credence.

The Will was created by Ignotus Peverell near his death. Apparently, upon seeing the power the Hallows had together, he knew that he couldn't risk them ever being united. He wouldn't allow anyone to become the Master of Death.

Albus had come to believe that the title was more of a metaphor: Death's master was someone who accepted the fact that they would eventually die. In the beginning, like many, he had thought the owner of all the Hallows would gain some immense power. But what if it was true?

But how did this tie into this unbelievable alternate universe theory? Assuming it was true, in fact. He glanced at the boy in front of him. His instincts were telling him it was. Aside from that was the Harry Potter in front of him didn't possess the cruel streak that the one he remembered had. He had toyed with the idea that this Potter was the Dark Lord's heir. He certainly held Hadrian's rather unique gift, but the physical resemblance was so striking that logic was telling him to dismiss the notion. Not to mention the corrupted memories – Hadrian would never do that to those loyal to him, especially not to blood.

"Sir?"

"Yes, Mr. Potter?"

"Am I?"

It took a moment for him to remember what the question was. But it was a question he didn't want to risk telling the truth in. "No, Mr. Potter." Although he was inclined to believe otherwise, it was possible that Harry would ally himself with his counterpart. And two campeadori...two people capable of inhuman speed, capable of throwing spells so quickly that many couldn't even react, capable of incredible healing abilities, and capable of frightening strength...

The Light may as well throw down their wands the moment it happened.

"With all due respect sir," the boy retorted, "I know you're lying. If I'm not the Dark Lord, then who is?"

"Did you not say yourself, Mr. Potter," he evaded calmly, "that the Dark Lord is Lord Voldemort?"

The boy stood with an unnatural swiftness that had Dumbledore reaching for his wand out of pure instinct. "That's rubbish, sir!"

"Mr. Potter," he relaxed his grip on his wand slightly, "I must ask you to demonstrate some more respect for me."

Harry's shoulders only tensed in reply. "Sorry sir. I will, but then you're going to have to show me the same respect. I know you're lying. If Voldemort was the Dark Lord, Riddle would be in Azkaban!"

"Tom, Mr. Potter," Albus corrected. So if what he is saying is true, Tom became the Dark Lord? Most would laugh at the idea. Tom was brilliant, charming, and completely unlike the unpleasant character one would expect of a Dark Lord. But Albus knew full well the duality of human nature. He, himself, had almost followed the Dark path alongside his friend Grindelwald all those years ago. It was a past he never wanted to think about again. "Very well then. The Dark Lord was once known as Neville Longbottom."

The boy looked as if he was about to object, but then he stopped. "Neville?" he repeated faintly. "The second prophecy child?" (A/N: Don't glare at me yet! It's not what you think) Knowing that Neville was not the second candidate for the prophecy, Dumbledore decided that this must have been an element of Harry's supposed universe.

"Yes, Neville eventually became the one people fear so much today."

Harry slid down into the chair. His innards froze into sharp, jagged ice. His stomach seemed to shred as it churned. "But why?" He gripped the arm rests. "How did this happen?"

Albus snapped up any reaction he could read from the teen's eyes. The reaction was most unexpected. But just how far did these unusual feelings stem?

An admittedly foolish hope, he believed, had lit inside him. A hope that he could redeem what he had always thought of as one of his greatest failures, a failure high enough to rival his failure to save Ariana.

The young Harry Potter had been under his care years ago, full of rage and pain from his treatment by his relatives. Albus had always blamed himself for not doing enough to rescue him from the path he had chosen. But, and again he called it a foolish hope, if the boy before him was somehow a younger version of Hadrian, alternate universe or no, then perhaps he could keep him from doing the same.

Make him see the error of his older self's ways.

Make him convince Hadrian –

Albus, he chided, this is no time to become senile. Steepling his fingers, he answered. "Neville," he carefully constructed, "had several experiences with Muggles that were anything but pleasant. I will not sugarcoat it, Mr. Potter. Those actions would be qualified as abuse in both the Muggle and the Wizarding worlds. I believe that it is this treatment that caused him to become fixated with the idea of magical superiority."

Neville, Harry thought in horror. It sounded so unlike him.

But when the headmaster started talking again, a sudden realization made him barely capable of holding back a curse.

It was a trick. And he had almost fallen for it!

That was right. If Neville had ever become a dark lord, then why did Riddle hate Harry on sight? It didn't make any sense! And Ron, Neville's right hand man?

Yeah right! Dean or Seamus maybe, but Ron? That was his friend. If Harry ever became a dark lord, Ron and Hermione would be his favored ones hands down. This universe might be messed up, but it still has some consistency, and Ron suddenly being Neville's best friend doesn't follow!

Calm down, he ordered himself, deciding to listen to his more Slytherin side. Dumbledore won't tell you anything if he believes you aren't buying it. He yanked up his occulmency shields. "That doesn't justify what he's doing!"

"Of course not, Mr. Potter. However, one must make the effort to understand if we are to truly know." Harry's brow crinkled slightly at that. Watching the man, he knew that the headmaster was thinking of way to juxtapose Neville's pureblood background with his supposed experience with Muggles.

Harry's experience with Muggles. With the Dursleys. With all the non-magical folk that had stood by and laughed when Dudley picked on him.

"First of all, you must understand that the young Dark Lord suffered from a hero complex," Dumbledore explained.

Snape's would have a field day if he heard you say that now, Harry thought dryly.

"When he first arrived at Hogwarts, he was consumed with the desire to strike down anyone in his path who appeared to be performing an injustice. But it was only those unfortunate people who saw his actions as self-righteous. The others were drawn to him. He was their protector. He never backed down from conflicts and when he won them, he destroyed his opponents." Pause. "However, it is because of this notion, combined with his vengefulness, that he became what he is today. You see, Neville-" Me, Harry bitterly corrected in his mind, "-viewed anyone with magic as special. Superior. Because muggleborns were forced to, at least in his mind, 'suffer' living with Muggles, who he believed would never truly accept magic, he was especially protective of them."

Not to mention my own mother was one.

"This of course, caused him to come into conflict with many of the older families."

"Purebloods." It would explain the focus 'Neville' put on vilifying them.

"Generally this was true," Dumbledore conceded. "I'm afraid that at the time, very few of them tolerated anyone that was not a pureblood. His family, despite their old family name, was also ridiculed for

supporting the Light. And so this left him in a rather unique situation. He loathed Muggles, yet at the same time, he couldn't stand the large majority of purebloods. Neville was, admittedly, to be commended for his lack of prejudice towards muggleborns. However, he took this to the extreme. He viewed himself as enlightened."

Harry's hands clenched and unclenched. "What happened?" Dumbledore's words chilled him to the bone. When he had seen how Riddle had gone bad in his sixth year from the penseive, he had always felt a sense of pity and, at times, empathy. He could understand feeling trapped and hated and wanting more. But hearing this...this was different. This wasn't about Riddle. It was about him. And he could see it happening to himself...just a few bad choices and it could have turned out this way.

"The Dark Lord was never particularly patient. Ancient prejudices take generations to overcome. As I said, Mr. Longbottom already had a bit of a hero complex. He was of the mindset that he would 'protect' the groups the wizarding world rejected. After all, he has always been the one taking care of everyone before. In his mind, they had already given him the authority to decide what was best for them. If the Wizarding world didn't want to change, he would make them change. He would create the world as he envisioned it to be."

As he finished, Dumbledore watched for Harry's reaction. The boy looked haunted. There was also anger, sorrow, and an unhealthy dose of bewilderment. It was clear that he didn't believe Hadrian's proclamation that this 'crusade' was for the benefit of others.

Dumbledore often wondered if Hadrian truly believed his own propaganda. It was almost impossible to understand his thoughts. Albus doubted even his closest friends truly understood. But he saw what the results of the dark Lord's 'quest' was, and it was an unending blood fest. It was for revenge and power. Nothing more.

He decided to prod the boy again. "Neville called for a total isolationist stance," he began. "He advocated the most extreme methods to facilitate this goal. Muggleborns were to be taken from their families and forcibly adopted by magical parents. (1) As for Muggles, he called for their extermination, with the exception of a

select few that would be there for breeding purposes. Families with a history of producing muggleborns, for example, or Muggles that had proved themselves somehow genetically invaluable. These surviving Muggles would be subjugated and used for undesirable labor.” Harry’s mouth dangled open in horror.

“Additionally, he had dealt a great blow to the older wizarding families by claiming that they were the source of all our present and future conflicts. Since the Ministry, admittedly, leaves much to be desired, middle and lower class families rallied around his words. His plans also state that wizards and witches would be ousted from the Wizarding world if they did not meet certain magical levels. I believe that in his propaganda he claims these tests will weed out ‘inbred’ purebloods and focus Wizarding society on merit instead of blood. Squibs, predictably, would be thrown out.”

As Harry mauled the information over, appearing nothing less than devastated, Albus reflected. Neville Longbottom had been a close friend of Hadrian’s at school, though not as close as the former Miss Granger and Mr. Weasley. He wondered how much worse the boy’s expression would be if he had told him the entire truth. He hoped that Harry’s desperation to prove his own idea wrong would make him latch onto the idea he was feeding him.

But Albus wasn’t going to kid himself: the deception wouldn’t only stand for so long. Hopefully, it would be long enough for Tom to extract valuable information and insights.

He had provided the Slytherin with the famished supply of memories he could unearth about the Dark Lord, but it wasn’t enough. An overwhelming majority of the vital information couldn’t be obtained. Hadrian’s experience at his relatives, for example. Youth was often the most telling because it came before one developed personas and learned to create defenses.

While they knew that Harry was mistreated, that didn’t tell them any habits or preferences that could lead them to discover what and where exactly his horcruxes were, or how many. For all he knew, there could be only one. Albus knew they existed, but so far nothing had given a concrete clue to what they were. At first, he had thought

that it would be one of the Founder's objects, since Hadrian liked to market himself as chivalrous and a champion bringing about some form of a new golden age.

But Gryffindor's Sword was elusive, Helga's Cup had yielded nothing, the Diadem's location was unknown, and what he could find of Slytherin's were not even close to touched. To be perfectly honest, the Light was getting desperate. They needed to know how Hadrian thought. Even without horcruxes - or a horcrux – the man was unpredictably ingenious when the time called for it. But without destroying the horcruxes, he was unbeatable.

Breaking the silence, Harry raised his head. "Can he beat him?"

"I am certain that it is within Tom's abilities." But would Tom be able to do what was necessary to defeat the Dark Lord for the final time? To turn his wand on himself?

It was an odd sensation, Harry thought. At the same time, he both wanted Riddle to be able to do it and not. It was like having a death wish. Sort of. But not really. The description of what Harry had become in this twisted world sickened him. A part of him was even ashamed, knowing that somewhere inside him, he had the capacity to become that person.

"That's right," he murmured to himself, "Tom's a model student." If he hadn't been so busy brooding, he might have been startled by his use of Tom's first name.

"He is, Mr. Potter. But more so, he is determined." Though that may be motivated more by survival than what we really need. "I have full confidence in him."

The headmaster considered the two. Tom was a star pupil, possibly the greatest that Hogwarts had ever seen. Effortlessly, he earned Outstanding's in every class and still had time to both tutor others and train himself.

The Harry he knew, on the other hand, wasn't the studious type. He had excelled only in specific areas, but in them he was exceptional.



He was brilliant at Charms and excellent at Transfiguration. In fact, Albus suspected that he and the now-married Weasley couple had become unregistered animagi by the end of their Hogwarts years. But Hadrian's true skill lay in Defense. Outside of the class, his dueling skills were unmatched, even before he came into his now-infamous campeador inheritance.

Campeador. It was ironic that a Late Latin word meaning 'champion' had come to mean something so entirely different. In the most ancient times, they were the Wizarding courts' warriors. Their abilities made them seem almost designed for the task. Instead of pitting armies against each other, they had one campeador fight to the death against the campeador of the other. The winner would claim victory for his lord or his government, depending on the case. It was a rather barbaric way of deciding politics, but it was a popular one. Anyone who 'owned' the allegiance of a campeador was a guaranteed force in the Wizarding world. Sometimes, the deciding one.

"Headmaster," Harry's voice tugged him from his morbid thoughts. "Thanks for speaking with me."

"Quite alright, Mr. Potter." After a second thought he added, "You may be excused from classes today. I realize that hearing this information must be a burden for you."

A mirthless smile ghosted across Harry's lips. "It's one I'm willing to bear." He stood with a small inclination of his head and headed outside. The doors shut behind him, and Harry continued walking until he had skirted past the gargoyle and stood in a random hallway.

"So," he stated in barely a whisper. "I'm the Dark Lord." Pause. "Good grief...I am the Dark Lord!"

Where had it gone so wrong? Was he really just trying to help and took it to the extreme, or was it all just for revenge? Harry had always wanted to change the Wizarding laws that were blatantly biased towards purebloods, but he wouldn't have gone that far...would he?

"I guess this just proves you could have," he muttered to himself, kicking a rogue stone unfortunate enough to be in his path. So, what

was he supposed to do now? He still had to figure some way out to get back home. Since he'd planted the seed in Dumbledore's mind, the older wizard might be able to help in that matter. Harry doubted he'd be able to do something like that himself. Maybe if he found Luna...

Wait, was Luna friends with 'him' as well?

Harry halted in his tracks. It suddenly occurred to him that all his friends might be on the Dark Lord's side. The more twisted part of him that was pleased with how much his friends must have cared about him if they were going to follow him that far warred with the more sensible part that was feeling nauseous at the idea. All of his friends, Dark wizards?

And what about Harry? The Gryffindor ran a hand through his hair. He had a choice now: he could stay out of it, or he could help. If they let him, that is. It would be one heck of a task to convince them all that he could be trusted. But fighting against his friends? Fighting against himself?

The thought was just too maybe there was still a chance to change his counterpart's mind. I mean, who's better at convincing you than yourself? Harry rolled his eyes, slightly giddy at the ludicrousness of the entire situation.

Cut it out, Harry. You have your own Dark Lord to beat, remember? You know, the one waiting back for you in your own dimension?

Yeah, but how do I even know when I'm going to be getting back? I should help while I'm here...I know he's not me, but I feel a bit...responsible.

The voice disagreed. The more time you spend gallivanting here, the more time wasted. Just focus on getting home. Dividing your attention will just mean you can't do either well. And seriously, if you come in contact with one of your friends – or you – how are you going to react to that anyway?

Well I...I'll fight.

Really? You'd turn your wand on yourself?

Harry hesitated. Sometimes his doubts were too smart for their own good. If it comes to that, then yes.

You don't sound very convinced But no matter, try this one on for size: you say you could turn your wand on yourself , but what about Ron? Hermione? Or Remus?

The muscles in Harry's jaw strained. I don't know. He'd been devastated after Lestrage killed Sirius. He was convinced that he'd indirectly killed him. Could he stomach being the direct cause of one of his friends' deaths, even if they were an alternate version of them? They still wore the same faces...

You can't hesitate in battle, Harry. You know that from dueling. If you hesitate, the chance is lost. It's the difference between victory and defeat. Between life and death. Can you stop yourself from hesitating?

Harry found himself standing in front of the corridor to the Great Hall. His sharp hearing snatched the voices of dining students ahead. "I don't know," he answered out loud. "But I want to help. Somehow. I guess I'll have to figure out what that somehow is." Taking a deep breath, he marched down the hall and opened the doors.

Several people glanced up as he entered, but soon it felt as if the entire school was staring. Was it just his imagination, or did the voices hush as well? Expertly ignoring them, he started towards the Slytherin table. He'd had worse as the Boy Who Lived.

Harry noticed Tom was staring at him, his eyes jumping around Harry's face. He seemed agitated. "Hello," Harry greeted them all and slid into the seat opposite him.

Tom blurted, "Where are your glasses?"

Harry blinked. "I took them off. They're useless anyway. Why?"

“...Well I,” Harry watched him fish around for an answer, “I just think you looked...better with them?” Bellatrix coughed, sounding suspiciously as if she was disguising laughter.

“Um, thanks, Tom,” Harry mumbled, face flushing. Of all the lame excuses to give, did it have to be something like that?

Tom’s eyes flickered in surprise. It took a moment for Harry to realize why. He’d called him ‘Tom’, not ‘Riddle’. Huh. Strange how one conversation can change that, can’t it? Harry couldn’t say that he’d completely stopped disliking Tom. There was too much history for that. But now, a large part of him was seeing him more like himself: both of them were called the Boy Who Lived, and both of them had to go through all the trials the title came with.

Tom cleared his throat. “You mean to say that your glasses miraculously changed their prescription?” Salazar, this can’t be happening now, of all times! Not after the recent Daily Prophet. He looks more like that photograph than ever!

Sense suddenly overrode he regretted the question. He’d just forced Potter to give an explanation!

Harry knew that there was another reason why Tom was so concerned with his glasses. “No. It’s more like my-” the brief panic that flitted through the Slytherin’s eyes caused him to steer away from that response “-glasses broke.” Tom was noticeably relieved.

Wait, if he was so relieved, did that mean he knew what he was going to say – and by extension, what was happening to him?

Lucius questioned, “Why weren’t you present today?”

“I skipped.” Both Bellatrix and Tom were incredulous, so he added, “I wasn’t feeling too well.”

“Ah.” The blonde drummed his fingers on the table once before suggesting, “Did you know someone in the accident?”

Tom's gaze snapped towards him. He knew Potter wouldn't pick up on it, but that tone told him that Lucius had another reason for asking. He wanted to gauge Potter's reaction.

"Accident?"

Lucius' immaculate eyebrows arched. "You haven't heard?" Tom's suspicions only rose when he started to slid the copy of the Daily Prophet he had been impossible to pry from all day towards Potter. Not only that, but Slytherins rarely inquired for personal information and Lucius followed this House characteristic even more closely than the others. It was unusual for him to ask for any more clarification. "I apologize for being the one to tell you."

Potter slowly reached for the paper, sipping one of the ceramic cups filled with pumpkin juice as he did so. His hand jerked as the title hit him. Startling green eyes widened, narrowed, and then soared across the printed letters.

Tom forced himself to eat as casually as he could. What was Lucius up to? Ever since the incident in Defense Against the Dark Arts a few weeks ago, he had been paying more attention to Potter than usual, but surely that wasn't for any reason other than lingering resentment?

Hopefully, that was all it was.

Potter's cup squeaked in protest of the strangle hold beginning to choke the life out of it. Tom tensed at the sound. Could normal people cause ceramic cups to creak? Maybe it was possible if they were trying incredibly hard...

Lucius stayed silent. His grey eyes soaked in every reaction he could glean.

Creak.

Oh no, his heart leapt, it's going to-!

The cup let out a final wail before splintering into a thousand shards. Nearby Slytherins shrieked and threw their hands up to protect

themselves from the launched clay daggers. The shouts knocked Potter back into reality.

“By Salazar, what was that?” Bellatrix demanded.

Tom quickly proclaimed, “Accidental magic!” and everyone seemed to take the explanation.

...Except for Lucius, whose grey eyes were narrowed at the cup still in Potter’s grasp. Nervously, Tom waved his wand and the cup repaired itself. “Judging from your strong reaction,” he fielded, “I suppose you knew someone there?”

Potter’s words were quiet and drawn out. “Yes. I suppose I do.”

Lucius’ expression didn’t even flicker. Tom knew him long enough to know that he hadn’t accepted the rationalization he had supplied them all with. What is he trying to do? He fiddled with the napkin in his hand. He couldn’t have figured it out, could he?

“My condolences,” he finally said.

Tom grabbed Harry’s arm. “Look Evander, you’ve cut yourself!” he exclaimed.

“Huh?” Harry started to glance at his hand. “What are you talk-?” Tom had yanked him to his feet before either he or the rest of the table could follow Potter’s gaze and notice that there wasn’t actually more than a nick there.

“I’ll show you where the Hospital Wing is – wouldn’t want you to bleed all over the homework you didn’t get now, would we?” He hauled Harry out of the table and headed out of the Great Hall. Hesitating for only a moment, Harry followed. Those annoying stares were still following him as they left.

Tom whirled around once they were out and started, mildly astonished that Potter had followed him. Regaining his composure, he asked in his Head Boy voice, “Where were you all this morning?”

"Like I said," Potter answered, "I wasn't feeling too well."

"Rubbish. Campe – you don't look sick." Correction: you don't get sick. Potter only shrugged. "Potter, don't you have any regard for your education?" Or for my sanity, more like? Do you have any idea how long I spend wondering when Hogwarts would implode or Death Eaters would storm the castle?

Surprisingly, Potter didn't have a sarcastic comment for the occasion. "I want to help."

"Help? What are you talking about? Help in what?"

"I want to help you defeat the Dark Lord."

An involuntary wince racked his body. "Pardon?" Where did this come from?

"Look," Potter explained calmly, "you don't have to admit it. In fact, I know you won't. But we both know I can be an asset and you need all the help you can get if you want to defeat him."

"...Where did this come from?" he decided to ask straight out. It was almost too good to be true! But Tom had no intention of turning his life into a Troy. "We don't even get along. Why would you want to place your life on the line – and yes, it could cost your life – to help me?"

"Call it a hero complex." Tom didn't like the cold look in his eyes.

Why is he acting like this? Don't tell me he put two and two together! In that case, he couldn't trust Potter. He might find some way of sabotaging everything. But if he believed he was helping and was trusted, he would be more likely to open up. Then Tom could use that as an opportunity to learn how the Dark Lord thought...and defeat him. "Alright, Potter," he feigned reluctance after a good interval. "I see your point. I still don't believe you know what you're getting yourself into, but if there is something you can help us with, I'll let you know. Does that sound fair?" He held out a hand.

Harry's gaze leapt from Tom to the hand and back. While the agreement appeared convincing, it was too quick for it to be genuine. If Harry hadn't been the Boy Who Lived in his own dimension, he probably would have believed it. As it was though, he knew that Tom didn't trust him at all. He shook the hand. "Sounds fair." If Tom still thought there was enough of an advantage to agreeing that he was extending a false hand of friendship, then that meant that Harry would still be helping, even if he didn't know exactly how.

"Then it's settled. I wouldn't miss the next class, though." Tom offered him a trademark charming smile. "However, that might just be the Head Boy talking, not me. I still have my duties."

Harry returned with a fake smile of his own. "Sure."

What is Potter up to? Tom wondered. Does he think he can weasel information out of me? Well, if that's his hope, he may as well surrender now. He continued brooding, oblivious as Lucius climbed through the porthole into the Head commons.

"Tom?"

"Hmm?" he turned. "Oh. Lucius."

The blonde raised an eyebrow. "You sound delighted to see me."

"It's not that," he answered distractedly, glancing around as if the answer to all his questions was hidden somewhere in the room. "You're not supposed to know the password..."

Lucius rolled his eyes and slid himself into the plush sofa nearby with his typical aristocratic elegance. "As if I wouldn't know by now. But discussing my disregard for school rules isn't why I came here."

Sighing, Tom sat down next to him. "What is it then?"

Lucius' eyes darted across his face. "I want to know what is wrong with Evander."



Involuntary jerk. Tom thought he had been doing a lot of that these days. "Excuse me?"

"Evander, Tom. I want to know what you know about him." His voice sharpened. "It is clear you knew him before he arrived in Hogwarts. He knows little to no current events, and the current political climate isn't exactly one a person could be unaware of."

Tom waved it off. "He's just sheltered, Lucius. It doesn't mean anything."

"You don't have eyes like that by being sheltered. You're eyes."

"What do you mean?"

"If he told me that he had to carry the world on his shoulders, I would believe him."

"Perhaps he has just lived a difficult life away from Wizarding society. There have been people who have gone into hiding since Hadrian rose again."

"Perhaps," Lucius repeated coolly. "But that does not explain several rather interesting observations I've made."

Tom glared. "I'm not in the mood for an interrogation, Lucius!"

"His strength," the blonde ignored him, "borders on unnatural."

"Some people are just stronger than others!"

"I couldn't destroy a cup with only my fingers, Tom. Can you?"

"It must have been a rather shoddy cup, then! It's just a coincidence. You still hold a grudge against him, don't you? You want to find some dirt on him. Give him some punishment."

This time Lucius was the one glaring at him. "That isn't my motivation. Why are you protecting him? What is his secret?"

“Secret? You would classify student confidentiality as a secret? A secret I should share? That is just unreasonable.” But what is Potter’s secret? Tom stood, collecting the books stacked on top of the table and moved them to another table just so he could accomplish his goals of a) avoiding the conversation and b) dodging Lucius’ gaze. What is he thinking?

“I will find out,” Lucius vowed behind him. “Even if Dumbledore is telling you not to tell me.” In his distraction, the comment caused Tom to glance back in surprise. Lucius smiled without emotion. “I see. It was him.”

He tricked me! Tom placed his books on the table with more force than was necessary. “Believe what you like.”

“I will do that,” was the dry response.

Tom scowled as the boy left. Wonderful. Yet another person to contend with. He paused. Maybe I should just tell them. I’ll have to eventually and I don’t want them to piece it together before I do. Besides, if Potter truly has delusions that I am a dark lord, this scheme of the headmaster’s and mine won’t progress at all. Reluctantly, he climbed the stairs to his dorm. Why must this always happen to me? Why –

“Mommy, that you?”

Tom froze. Parseltongue! That meant –

He leapt through the door and fell on his knees in front of the toad’s nest. The cockatrice had hatched! “Come out here,” Tom instructed, searching the room. The blanket covering the nest squirmed. A small scaly head poked out of it.

“You not mommy!” it accused.

Tom slammed his eyes shut as a wave of vertigo crashed through him. The cockatrice’s gaze wouldn’t kill yet, but that didn’t mean that it wasn’t going to have any affect while it matured. Thank goodness it had eyelids – snakes didn’t. “Close your eyes!”

Obediently, the cockatrice did as it was told. "Where mommy?"

"Where is mother," Tom corrected. "And for all intents and purposes, I am your mother."

The creature flicked a forked tongue out from its beak. "You not mommy."

"You are not mother." Tom frowned. "And yes, I am your mother."

"No!" it insisted. "Mother brought food! Mother left. Mother say she come back."

A fresh wave of panic ripped through him. Someone else had been here? Someone else had fed his cockatrice? "Oh Merlin," he moaned. "I am going to be expelled!"

Wait, could Potter have been the person who fed it? No, Tom thought, he most definitely would have reported it. But who else could it be? Tom knew that the cockatrice wouldn't know the difference between a male and female human, so he couldn't take the 'she' pronoun it used seriously. Furthermore, the only female around was Jasmine, and he knew that if she had done it, he wouldn't be having this conversation with his new pet right now.

...And since it didn't have much of an understanding of what a father was, he was stuck with the title 'mother' until it was older.

"You said," he tried to keep himself collected, "that someone else was here?"

"Mother was here. Mother say she come back."

Wait, 'mother say she come back'?

There was another parselmouth at the school?!

"Impossible! I'm the last of the Gaunts!" Tom bit his lip. This was bad. The only other person he could think of was Dumbledore. He

understood Parseltongue, but Tom didn't think that the man could speak it. However, if the headmaster knew, there were going to be hefty repercussions. Officially, Tom owned a toad at Hogwarts, and he had planned to keep it that way. Cockatrices weren't exactly legal.

"Azkaban, here I come," he muttered. Honestly, Potter seemed the most likely candidate. But he hadn't said anything – and Hadrian wasn't a parselmouth!

"Mother...want mother..."

"I want mother..." That's right. If Potter was the first person the cockatrice had seen, it would have automatically identified him as its parent. Curses. And Tom had planned so carefully for all these months!

...Could Potter's alternate universe explanation have merit?

"Don't be ridiculous," Tom scoffed, but a part of him wasn't so sure any more. "No. Stop it. There must be a rational explanation for this. Alternate universe indeed..." Now he just needed to find that rational explanation.

He cursed Potter for making everything so complicated. But maybe he should start looking into the idea. This was magic they were talking about, after all. Maybe he shouldn't start laughing in his face when he brought it up again...

(1) Yes, this is from Mizuni-sama's Prince of the Dark Kingdom. Naturally, I don't own this, but it was a really cool idea, and something I thought made sense for Hadrian's "platform".

A/N: Wow, that was a long chapter. More information than action this time, but I felt it was necessary. In case anyone is wondering why Andy is calling the horcrux Harry "Saber" now, it's by the horcrux's request. I also figured that if Harry hadn't had a Dark Lord to contend with and knew about his father's animagus ability, he would have done something similar with Ron and Hermione. Also, I know a lot of you thought the egg was going to be a basilisk, but according to good old Wikipedia, a basilisk would have to be hatched under a rooster,

and I didn't think that would work for a Hogwart's student. Plus, snakes don't have eyelids, so the basilisk probably wouldn't either, while the cockatrice might. I based it off of Wikipedia's photo of the cockatrice on Belvedere Castle, in case anyone is interested. And another also that might interest you: I've been toying the idea of a light pairing, which would be Bellatrix with either Tom or Harry. Since I don't have a strong preference, I'd rather hear what you think about it, or if you'd prefer not to have one at all.

Anyway, I have some questions here for anyone who wants to give feedback: does the timing for Harry and Tom getting an actual truce feel right? Originally, I planned for another disagreement here, but in the end I felt like it was better to scrap it. Does Dumbledore's analysis of Hadrian make sense or does it need more elaboration/has something missing? Did you expect Harry to be fooled by Dumbledore or do you think he should have been? Did Harry seem to be in enough of a dilemma, too much, etc? Any other comments, like whether you think Harry should support his Dark self or not (personally, I'm curious as to how many people want him to join Hadrian)? It's about the time I have to decide, so any thoughts would be great! I'll also put this as a poll on my page, just in case.

Thanks for reading!

Disclaimer: the extent of my Latin is 'carpe diem'; none of the spells here are necessarily grammatically correct. And, as usual, I don't own Harry Potter. Or cell phones.

Reviews: xChezx, cyiusblack, Xenia Marvolo, and anakin potter evan: I'm glad you like that last chapter! ShinjuKuroba: do you know if I can find a site for this on the internet? I know that Fantastic Beasts is a book, though I don't have it. Thanks for telling me; it's nice to know you liked the cockatrice anyway :) Regamj: I'm glad you found it believable and don't worry, I'm trying to have Tom and Harry build a friendship...hopefully that will be realistic too, lol. Disco-Dancing on the Roof and nxkris: lol, nice to know you liked the cockatrice. Sorrow's Voice: thanks! Lol, after I thought about it for a while, Bellatrix/Harry seemed too weird for this fic, too. I'm glad the truce and the analysis made sense; I wasn't totally sure on that one. StarDotStar: lol, it made sense. When I saw writing this chapter, I had that same semantics problem. Thanks for your input! Barranca: lol, after thinking about it for a while, I figured the same :) So, light/minor Tom and Bellatrix pairing it is. Befread and Ilaaris: thanks! Ying Shan Hong: well, because of the Philosopher's Stone (more in that in this chapter, in case that sounds random), she'll have a mid-twenties appearance even though she's much older. Thanks for the input! ev80: I'm glad you like my story! I think I'm going to aim for a friendship between the two though; given their history, I'm not sure that I could make romance work between them. Lucillia: lol, I've been toying with that idea myself. Thanks for your suggestions! TheLastCrumpet: I'm glad you like the characters here; it's the main thing I'm trying to work on in this fic, and it's always great to hear that you like the plot :) baduk: lol, I'm glad you like the cockatrice! Coyote: thank you for your feedback! I'm glad you liked poor, horcrux-victim Colin, lol. Moonlit Wave: I'm glad you like this story so much! Thanks for telling me what you think about the truce and Harry's dilemma :) baeryl: You're right; HP canon says it should be a basilisk, but my mom stole my HP books and Wikipedia was my only source left, so...well, you get the idea. It said that the cockatrice was a rooster's egg hatched under a toad. Basilisk's Fang: I'm glad you think Ron calling Hadrian, well, "Hadrian" makes sense. And yes \*sigh\* I guess I did mess up with the cockatrice, lol. Dot: thanks! I hope your question is answered (sort of) in this chapter. \*Pause\* OK, it's not really addressed that well. Basically, Hadrian uses the Map horcrux

as both a spy and a 'commanding officer', I guess you could say, for his affairs in Hogwarts. Jasmine, Teddy, Hugo, and Rose are the only ones who have seen Hadrian's face since they are the only Inner Circle DE children at Hogwarts. The horcrux wanted to gather as much information as he could before speaking to Hadrian, so none of them told their parents. Pryotra and Wonderfoal: I'm glad you liked my story! Will: in this fic, I'm trying to have Harry grow through his experiences. His tirade was purposefully showing some prejudice, but mostly plain, badly restrained anger.

For Those of You that Requested a Timeline:

Year One: Hadrian gains the Philosopher's Stone (Sorcerer's Stone)

Year Two: Hadrian, with a temporary body given to him by the Stone, manages to break out a number of his supporters from Azkaban and begins to reestablish his forces; Hadrian gains the Cloak and the Ring

Year Three: Ron attempts to kidnap Tom from Hogwarts but fails and is imprisoned again; Muggles report inferni attacks and unexplained murders, which the Ministry ignores

Year Four: Triwizard Tournament; Hadrian gains a permanent body; Tom learns the Prophecy

Year Five: Department of Mysteries incident; Bellatrix's father is killed

Year Six: Tom learns of the existence of horcruxes and that Gryffindor's Sword (location unknown) is likely one of them; Hadrian defeats Dumbledore during an attack on Hogwarts and takes the Elder Wand

## Chapter Ten

"Just look at this!" the boy across the room half screamed in excitement, jabbing the cell phone he'd bought as if he were aiming for a killing blow. His girlfriend boasted about her own magically-powered cell phone, which was a garish neon pink.

As they blabbered on about its latest features, Tom scowled. Technomage, the shop that sold Muggle technology that ran on magic instead of batteries or electricity, was swamped with patrons.

The impenetrable mob squeezed their way into the store, probably causing a thousand galleons worth of injuries in the process. Everyone with an ounce of sense knew that Technomage donated half its funds to Hadrian and his Death Eaters, and with the popularity of technomagic, the Dark Lord would probably be able to purchase himself a castle or two.

“Tell me,” Tom glared at the squad of students mashed their way out of what he had long since dubbed Death-Eaters-R-Us, “why we chose to eat at Madam Puddifoot’s again, Bella?”

Her tug on his arm drew him into the accursed restaurant. “Man up, Riddle,” Bellatrix grinned. “You can endure this small bit of torture for me, can’t you? It’s serves excellent food.”

“You have a rather flexible definition of ‘small’, Bella,” he shuddered. People in there had no sense of propriety. Why was Bellatrix even herding him in here? She wasn’t the type of girl who liked disturbingly couple-infected places like this. In fact, the so called ‘Silver Trio’ and their year mates spent all of third and fourth year trying to avoid the barfing spells Tom had been certain the place was emitting.

Absolutely gaudy.

Hopefully Lucius and Narcissa would be there to at least set some standards.

Just when he thought that nothing less than heavenly ambrosia would be worth dining in there, Bellatrix ‘encouraged’ him to the front of the line. Immediately, a waitress seemed to apparate in front of them. “Table for two?” she smiled at them. Tom held in a sigh. She was evidently a member of the 99% of the Wizarding world that believed they were a couple, thanks to the blasted Prophet.

If any of them had any sense, they’d know it was all just gossip. Bellatrix wouldn’t like a half-blood like him. Her family would never approve, no matter how much they liked him.

“Yes,” Bellatrix beamed back, looking entirely too pleased to be here. But then again, she’d been acting strangely ever since she’d asked



him to come with her to Hogsmead, no doubt to escape watching her younger sister and Lucius discretely (or so they thought) drool over each other.

On the other hand, she could be in much a good mood because they hadn't seen a single Gryffindor in Hogsmead yet. Fate must have decided to pity them for once.

They slid into a booth and the waitress handed each of them a menu. She winked at Tom, who decided that if Bella didn't mind, it wasn't worth telling her that he, contrary to popular belief, was currently dating books of obscure curses and having an affair with dueling and homework on the side, and not the aristocratic beauty in front of him.

Lucius had once informed him in mock seriousness that he was confident that Tom could do better than his homework, but it wasn't exactly like Tom had the time. He planned to stay alive as long as he could, and that meant researching ways to kill the mad man that had it out for him every spare moment of his life.

Besides, his life expectancy was probably less than a year. Which girl would want to risk the pain that would cause?

Five galleons more contributed to Hadrian's Let's-Kill-the-Purebloods fund, he commented sarcastically as yet another person plowed into Technomage.

"Tom. Tom!"

He turned to her.

"As attractive as the silent brooding is, why..?"

"Oh, I'm just thinking of how much Hadrian's Gringott's account is accruing right now," he replied calmly. It was if he had just flipped a switch. Bella looked down and stirred her butterbeer. Why she was so dejected? Hadn't she wanted to come here, or were the kill-joy affects of Madam Puddifoot's experiencing a delayed reaction time today?

Bellatrix managed not to sigh. This was possibly the worst fake-date ever. Really, for a genius, Tom could be a complete idiot at times. She had figured that when she had asked him to come with her yesterday, he would understand what she meant. I was wondering if you would want to come to Hogsmead with me, she recalled saying, and then added, stretching the subtly, Just us two. Lucius won't be there.

Honestly, he had to be the one person who wouldn't have gotten it if a girl had said that to him! Was it mentioning Lucius' name that ruined the affect? Did he think she was just commenting on how the blonde had abandoned them in favor of Narcissa?

Well, whatever it was, she decided to play the Last Resort card: she raised an eyebrow, placed her hands on her hips, and then stated: to Madam Puddifoot's.

There, she'd said it. The one place that every couple unfailingly went to for a date. It was a classic, a tradition. No matter how much anyone hated the place, they went there at some point.

As soon as he had started protesting the choice she knew it was no use – anyone who had realized they had just been asked out would have been discrete about their horror - and marched off. "Riddle? You are an impossible," she had scowled.

But he had come, hadn't he? It wasn't a date, but it was still...nice..?

Argh. She'd never actually had to work to get a boyfriend before, and now it looked like she'd have to ambush him in a hallway, shove him in a broom closet, and then molest him before he realized her less-than-pure intentions.

Narcissa would burst a blood vessel laughing, if she hadn't already.

Ha, ha, Cissy, she 'accidentally' tore her paper napkin. Very funny.

Tom broke out of his attempt to kill people just by glowering at them with a wince, his hand clapping over his scar. From years of being forced to share a connection with the Dark Lord, he could identify the

emotion: competitive thrill. It was the same rush that flooded him whenever Hadrian was fighting, whether to the death or not.

It was the same reason the Dark Lord was infamous for his exhilarated laughing in battle. Sadistic lunatic, Tom muttered to himself.

“What is it?” Bella asked anxiously.

“It’s nothing,” he brushed it off. “Don’t trouble yourself.”

“And what if I want to trouble myself with it?” The sharp tone startled him. “You don’t have to keep everything to yourself, Riddle! I want to be there when you need-” Warmth crept into her cheeks, but she didn’t stop glaring at him. “I want to help you.”

Tom frowned. “Bella, it really wasn’t that bad. Besides, why would you even want to worry yourself unnecessarily? Hadrian and everything to do with him is my problem. You shouldn’t have to be involved.” If you are, that means I’m failing in my duty.

“I am unbelievably close to dumping my butterbeer all over you.”

Tom exclaimed, “What did I do?”

“Argh! You’re being such a stereotypical male today, it’s almost sad!”

“...You mean I’ve offended you without realizing it? If that’s the case-”

“That’s not what I meant!”

“Then what do you mean?” She groaned in response to the question. “Bella, I can’t clarify what I meant if you don’t tell me what I said.”

“Come on, Riddle! Yesterday, yesterday I said – I said that I wanted you to come to Hogsmead with me.”

“Yes..?”

“Just us two’!”

“And we’re here. What seems to be amiss?”

“...How do you get straight O’s like this?!”

“Bella-”

“No! Forget it! Forget I said anything! I-”

”Confringo!” Dirt and the debris of wooden crates exploded from the outside. Shards of timber sprayed into the restaurant, and Tom immediately threw up a shielding spell designed to repel physical objects.

Pandemonium erupted in the streets.

“What,” Bella gasped, “was that?”

Tom grabbed her hand and pulled her out of the booth, wand out. Dark cloaked figures were pouring out of the north of the town. “Death Eaters.”

Despondently, Harry rifled through yet another book on alternate universes. He had decided to name it Old Faithful – it faithfully provided him with no relevant information at all.

“Come on,” he muttered. “Can’t you do this one thing for me, you stupid collection of papers?” From the book store owner’s scribbling, he could tell that she hadn’t heard him insult her merchandise.

Harry restrained himself from slamming his head on the shelf. Hours of leafing through pages and he was no closer to what he needed to know than before. What had he learned? That they theoretically existed and the reasons why people believed they did.

Ugh. Utterly useless.

I woke up early and freed myself from a snake-bat-chicken hybrid for this? He massaged the bridge of his nose. The snake-bat-chicken

hybrid, which Harry had discovered was a cockatrice, had sneaked into his bed in the middle of the night at some point and curled itself on top of his stomach. It had thrown a hissy fit and had adamantly refused to let Harry free himself from its clutches once Harry had said he was going out.

If he hadn't woken up early, it would have been a disaster trying to explain why he was wrestling it off him to Tom, especially since Nagini was constantly chanting 'mommy, mommy' whenever he'd walked into the room.

So far his 'I am completely ignorant of the deadly creature you've hatched' act seemed to be working.

...Sort of. He couldn't see it, but he felt his Slytherin roommate's suspicious gaze on him whenever his back was turned.

In other news, Harry had noticed that Hogsmead had undergone a makeover. In this world, there was a large store settled in the center dedicated to what he learned was called 'technomagic', if the name of the store was any indicator.

"I can't believe no one thought about this in my place," Harry shook his head. Sighing, he left the bookstore and plodded around Hogsmead until he didn't even know where he was going. As his gaze drifted across the crowd, he stopped. Harry turned and found two cloaked figures watching him beneath their hoods outside of the Hogshead. Their attention lingered on him for a moment before they looked away.

Green Floo smoke rose up from inside the building. Harry's eyes flickered over the 'closed' sign strung on the door. If it was closed, why were people still inside?

Manger's meeting? he suggested to himself. The unlit interior the windows hinted at made him doubt the thought. Besides, the Hogshead was always a ridiculously busy place, especially for the less upstanding citizens of the Wizarding world. It was, after all, where Hagrid got Norbert. Even if there was a meeting, they have the store open and the gathering in a separate room.

More smoke. If it was a conference it was clearly a large one.

Forget it, Harry. Just enjoy your day. He turned and started to take a step forwards when the Hogshead door blasted open and more dark, cloaked figures streamed into the streets. Their robes swishing around them, they brought out their wands. Sunlight hit their leonine masks, igniting them into pure gold.

Harry wasn't exactly sure they were anymore than overdue adult trick-or-treaters until the screaming started.

"Death Eaters!" someone cried.

Great. So they were this world's Death Eaters? Harry seized his wand and shot up a shield as the Death Eaters started firing curses left, right, and center. The Floo, he realized. They either disposed of the Hogshead's owner to use it, or the owner willingly let them in. The Dark wizards divided into predetermined groups and shot through the alleys into the other parts of town.

Battle instincts kicked in. Harry started to back out of the middle of the road to make himself less of a target when he realized that no one else was fighting back. The Hogshead was on the northern outskirts of Hogsmead; if no one held them off, the Death Eaters practically had free passage to the densely populated center.

The people here don't have a lot of dueling experience. I have to be the one to keep the Death Eaters from passing. Harry sprung up and, defying all his training, planted himself in the center of the road. Summoning his magic, he conjured a wide range shield, protecting the fleeing inhabitants from getting hit. Instantly spells catapulted into it, and Harry took a breath, letting adrenaline electrify his muscles.

He'd been too late to stop the chunk of Death Eaters from getting through, but he couldn't follow them. Being attacked from the front and the back would make it hard to help anyone.

The Death Eaters here, Harry noted, are organized. They had already known where they were assigned to go and had gone. Hopefully that

means that they've had to significantly divide their forces. Grimly, Harry felt a trickle of sweat down his back. Using raw magic like this wasn't his forte, and if the inhabitation didn't find a hiding place soon, he'd be forced to let down the shield before they were safe.

"Debilitatio!"

"Exolesco!"

The spells were sapping the strength from his shield. Harry glanced at the mini squad of Death Eaters hacking away at his defenses. Seven of them, he counted and glanced back. Two students had fallen in the street, apparently Stunned, though he couldn't be sure.

But there was no time to go check. The rest had already escaped.

Watching the spells chucked at him for just the right timing, Harry canceled the shield and jumped over a particularly unfriendly looking yellow one.

He leapt to the side. Calling an overflow of magic, he blasted a signature expelliarmus at the first Death Eater. The shield the masked wizard had set up crumbled and he slammed into the wall, unconscious.

The move changed the mood of the battle. The remaining six were surprised for barely a second before a couple of them dived into the nearest shelter, opting to shoot at him from there. Suddenly Harry Potter was worth actual consideration.

Harry's attention snapped towards the nearest one. He slashed his wand through the patterns of a shielding charm, executing a spin kick to the Death Eater's head that sent him careening into the ground. The hasty stupefy his opponent had tossed bounced off the shield and back. Not wasting even a moment, Harry landed and darted past the fallen man, shooting off a curse into his next target.

A pocket of the black cloaked figures were using the barrels behind Rosmerta's as cover. They still treat this like a Muggle fight. If you're going to use cover here, you're going to have to protect it as well.

Absently Summoning a rock to block the latest spell rocketing towards him, Harry Banished the barrels and instantly followed up with Stunners. One of them nicked the bewildered Death Eater nearest to him, immobilizing his arm, while the others crumpled.

The nicked Death Eater recovered from the shock of suddenly losing his shelter. "Lanio!"

"Acies fallax!"

"Mactol!"

Running to the side, Harry blasted the overhanging roof above them. "Argh!" The Death Eaters scrambled out of the way as it fell and Harry took advantage of the distraction to lather the group with another round of spells.

That squad was down. Time to go looking for another one, Harry thought wryly, running towards the center of town where he knew he would find more.

The sound of spells and the results of said spells snatched his attention. Three students, Harry recognized them as fourth and fifth year Ravenclaws, were shooting spells through a window. One of the Death Eaters was flinging curses at the door, and Harry had no doubt that someone was reinforcing it from the inside.

He briefly pondered why the Death Eaters didn't just blast a hole through the wall to get in if they wanted to get the students so badly. But let's hope they don't get the time to think of that. "Hey idiots!" Harry called out, purposely injecting as much disdain into the title as he could. Sure, it ruined the element of surprise, but it took the focus off the Ravenclaws, who were showing noticeable signs of magical exhaustion, and who didn't appear to have much prior battle experience at all. Let's them attack Harry instead.

Every single Death Eater whirled around to face him. "Oh, you respond to that, do you? I suppose that low self-esteem has to come from somewhere," he shrugged carelessly. "Judging from the



cowardly way you're attacking civilians, I could hazard a guess that it's your dueling skills."

Harry had barely finished the insult before he learned just where the stereotype of 'Gryffindor's are impulsive' came from. "You there," he addressed the students while parrying a volley of curses, "get out of here! Find Dumbledore!"

"We can't get him!" the fourth year of the group insisted. "Tom said that the Death Eaters were going to surround the road back to Hogwarts!"

'The road'? Why would the Ravenclaws use the – oh. He'd almost forgotten. No one currently at Hogwarts besides himself would know about the secret passageway through Honeydukes.

"Flabra!" Harry yelled at the Death Eaters, dodging yet another curse. He couldn't imagine how anyone managed to talk in situations like these, let alone monologue like his world's enemies managed to do. "Where's – caeco! – Tom?"

"Stupefy!" The Ravenclaw let out a cry as the edge of the windowsill was hit, spraying wood all over his face. "Tom's team is trying to break through the Death Eater blockade that's stopping everyone from getting back."

'Team', huh? Figures he'd be able to keep a calm head and use some sense. With a sweep of his wand, Harry took out another Death Eater.

"You idiots!" a masked one in front of him with what appeared to be a garnet bindi in the center of his mask's forehead roared. "Take out that boy and the rest are easy picking!"

Harry laughed, twirling his wand. "Give it your best shot!" The bindis must be a sign of rank; if he took out these Death Eaters' superior officer, they'd fall into chaos.

They trained their wands on him. Grinning, Harry aimed at the closest one, who was crouching to his right across the street. He was obviously a new recruit, given the way Harry had seen him dueling.

Opting for a reckless move that would probably have half the Order screaming at him, Harry charged in his direction, adding some yelling to up the intimidation factor. The Death Eater squeaked, completely paralyzed by shock and fear at the move. Just as predicted, Harry thought to himself. He folded a protego around himself and grabbed him. Thank you, he hauled him in front of his chest, enhanced strength. Ending the spell, he Stunned his victim. Employing him as a human shield, he barreled towards the commanding Death Eater.

Using his new protection to absorb offensive spells and weaving under and past ones that looked too threatening for his conscience to allow him to use his new shield, he launched hexes, all the while advancing on his main target.

Bindi Death Eater, as Harry had temporarily christened him, retreated backwards while throwing his curses. From the way his eyes went from wide to narrowed, Harry guessed he knew what he was trying to do. Just four more steps, Harry counted, getting ready to halt. Three, two, one – “Catch!” Harry pitched his battered shield into the Death Eater’s arms.

“Wha-?” To Harry’s mild disappointment, the man was trained well. He didn’t drop his wand in reflex or grab the Death Eater shield full on. Instead, he had moved to the side to catch Harry’s former armor.

Shoving aside the thought, Harry fired a Stunner. The man just barely managed to put up a shield in time, and even then it was flimsy. Pressing his advantage, Harry fired an even more powerful one and pressed forward, planning to sweep the man’s legs off under him while he was busy keeping up a shield. Shields, after all, couldn’t block both spells and physical objects simultaneously.

Bindi Death Eater unceremoniously dropped his cargo and replied accordingly to Harry’s attack. Harry almost tired not to grin. It was impolite. But at the same time, he’d learned that it unnerved his opponents, and unnerved meant mistakes.

"Give up boy," the Death Eater growled. "You're good, but you're no match for the Black Rook!"

"What's up with Death Eaters and chess?" Harry mused, inching closer while circling around him to avoid a potential lucky shot from the rooky Death Eaters. If any of the spells were shooting at him, they were now shooting at Bindi.

"Stupid fool!"

"You know, my teacher always said that redundancies weren't good English."

There - he was close enough!

The Death Eater was about to respond, but Harry dropped to the ground as he finished his spell. The reflected Stunner flew over his head and Harry began to kick Bindi's feet. Unfortunately, the man jumped, but Harry was fast enough to cause him to stumble. "Stupefy!"

"P-protego!" the man called out. Harry leapt to his feet and helped the man fall with a shove. Thanking his newfound swiftness again, he wrenched the Death Eater's wand out of his grip. "What are-?" Harry Stunned him before he could complete the sentence, but from the expression on his face he could tell what he was going to ask: "What are you?"

"Wish I knew," Harry shrugged, though it did bother him that he didn't know. Not that I'm complaining or anything. He jumped over the fallen body. A battlefield was no place to become lost in thought.

"Rook!" Harry heard one of the newbies shriek into a two-way mirror. "The colonel is down! There's this kid here-"

"I know." The voice had an eerie familiarity to it that caused Harry to freeze for a moment. "I see him."

He shook himself. "So they have an even higher commanding officer behind all this," Harry recognized. "Well then..." He rose and tore across the road to the other side, shooting a jinx that put the tattler out of commission as he did so. This part of Hogsmead was now secure.

Sprinting up to the Ravenclaws, who were gaping at him in amazement, Harry told them, "I need you to do me a favor." He tried not to fidget under their gawking.

"Er, y-yeah. Yeah, sure, what do you need?"

Harry pretended not to notice the stuttering. "Get to Honeydukes. There's a cellar there with a secret passageway in the floor that leads to Hogwarts. Go to Dumbledore's office immediately and tell him what's going on. Got that?"

"But there are Death Eaters there! How are we going to get in?"

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Make a door." He received blank stares and tried not to sigh. Doesn't anyone else think of this sort of thing? "Look, my memory about this isn't great, but aren't there what, three stores on either side of Honeydukes?" They nodded. "Thought so. Start on the third one and blast a hole through its wall to next store. Go through the next store and blast a hole through its wall. Do that until you get into Honeydukes. That way, you bypass all the Death Eaters and the buildings you'll be passing through will protect you." He added, "If the Death Eaters are closest to Honeydukes, make sure you have another set of people ready to stop them from following you inside. If the students are closer, just make sure they know you're coming through so they don't think you're Death Eaters."

"O...ok," they agreed. Harry was tempted to ask them to repeat the instructions, but there wasn't time, and he figured that they got the gist of it anyway. "Um...sir?"

Harry gave him an incredulous look. He was calling him 'sir'?

The boy blushed. "Um, well, uh, what about property damages? I don't think my parents will want to pay..."

"You're joking." Trust a Ravenclaw to worry about the law at a time like this. "I think you're parents will be willing to pay if it means saving your life and the life of all your friends. Now go!" Obediently, the three of them dashed out of the store and scurried off to find Honeydukes.

Praying that they'd be fine, Harry started off to find this Death Eater barricade they were talking about. Picking off the occasional Death Eater that had his or her back turned to him and dueling, either physically or magically, a couple of them, he sprinted past the back route of Technomage. He was partially aware of someone following him, but since there were no objects and/or spells being chucked at him, he didn't quite care at the moment.

"Evander!" Harry turned his head, seeing Bellatrix and Tom running towards him.

What are they doing here? The boy said they'd be at the barricade -

Bellatrix waved her wand. "Impedimenta!" Harry instinctively dodged. "No, I'm not aiming at you! Look behind-!"

Harry whirled around, realizing that the person who was following him was ...panting?

A sleek, muscular dog bounded towards him. A Doberman..? Harry was too shocked at the unexpected sight to unleash a spell. The canine plowed into his chest.

Bellatrix shouted a word that her pureblood relatives would disown her for.

Harry hit the ground, gritting his teeth as the pebbles and rocks ripped into his back. "Ugh," he grunted. The Doberman's hot slobber scalded his cheek. Harry opened his eyes. He's going to tear out my throat, he thought vaguely, strangely undisturbed at the revelation.

Then suddenly the dog froze. His savage snarl slackened.

"Praepedio!" Bellatrix cried frantically.

The Doberman overcame whatever made it pause and jumped out of the way of the curse. He skidded to a stop and Harry could only stare in morbid fascination as its fur rippled and its features twisted. A tall redhead man was standing in its place, staring at him in astonishment. "Harry?"

Harry felt himself choke. "Ron?"

"Diffindo! Evander, get away from him! That's Weasley, the Black Rook!"

Numbly recalling the situation, Harry staggered to his feet. Ron – no, this world's version of Ron – whipped his wand around and pointed it at Bellatrix. "Expulso!"

Tom negated the curse, feeling its raw power singe the air around him. "Bella, go!"

"Are you mad?" she whirled on him. "Why would I do that?"

"I can handle this," he insisted.

"It's not as if I'm useless, Riddle! Deprimo! Reducto!"

Weasley laughed, his cruel voice ricocheting through the buildings. "Look who decided to come! You and your girlfriend planning to test your mettle against me, are you Riddle?"

"Bella-" Tom began.

"Need I remind you? I'm ranked just below you in the dueling club. I can hold my own. Two of us doubles the chances of winning, and we need to win."

A lash of fear struck him. Tom loathed dragging other people into this. This was his responsibility – him against Hadrian. But she was right. It made tactical sense to let her assist him. Both of them were excellent duelers. If Tom was pitted alone against Weasley, Tom

would probably manage to win. But not without taking serious damage. Two of them would certainly help.

However, if Potter joined Weasley...

Training the majority of his attention on the insane canine animagus beginning to loop around them, Tom eyed the boy at the corner of his vision. The Gryffindor looked faint and he wouldn't be surprised if he wasn't even clearly aware of what was going on.

Bellatrix sank into a perfect standard dueling stance. Keeping his own wand trained on Weasley, Tom motioned for her to slowly back away from the prowling man, doing the same. He wasn't going to let Weasley get any closer to them than necessary.

He forced himself to turn all his focus on the imminent duel and strangled the urge to tell her to go again. He couldn't afford to worry about Bella right now, nor the fact that he had no idea if help was even going to come. Distractions decided everything.

"Well Weasel," Tom aimed for a smirk. "White may go first in chess, but this time it's your move."

"You're going to wish you never said that, boy." As he lifted his wand, his gaze jumped to Harry, who was still staring dumbly back at him. Tom felt himself stiffen when Weasley began to move in front of the boy. It was a protective gesture that few would have noticed, and yet it was visible from Weasley's initial reaction that he was just as shocked to see Harry as Tom had been when the Gryffindor had first arrived.

His loyalty must have been automatic. Does this confirm that Potter isn't in league with Hadrian? Quickly, he pushed away the thought and launched the first curse. "Corrumpo."

"Discutio," Weasley answered.

"Deflagro!" Bellatrix joined in. "Calamitosus!"

Weasley used his Doberman form to easily vault over the spells. He shifted back and shot off another spell. Tom deflected it and let his next spell hit the ground right in front of the man, kicking up dirt into the redhead's eyes. "Prurio!" Weasley roared, wiping his face.

Tom hissed as the hex sliced by far too close to his liking. They were in close quarters, a disadvantage to everyone except a campeadori, and none of them held that particular talent.

He glanced around him and realized he was standing next to a toy store. Perfect, he thought and sent out a wave of magic. The toys shuddered and came to life. Tom wandlessly arched them overhead and then hurled them towards Weasley.

He followed up with a Tongue Tying Jinx as the hippogriffs, dragons, and unicorns pummeled the animagus, who was too busy alternating between blocking spells and casting a wide range Levitation Charm on the flying toys to avoid every hit. As soon as they dropped on the ground, the animated animals either charged at him, or started tossing everything in sight in his direction. Weasley flung a couple to the side, but they kept on coming back.

Ron growled. Bellatrix laughed. "Is the Weasel having fun?"

"Detrunco!"

Bella yelped as the grazed her arm, cleaving a gnash on her skin. "Alright you disgusting whelp," she snapped. "You want to play? I'll start playing! Sectumsempra!"

"Bellatrix!" Tom was alarmed. He didn't expect her to start using the Dark Arts like that!

She rolled her eyes. "Fine, I'll leave Severus' pet creations for his use. Except this one: levicorpus!"

Reaching out his wand, Tom silently Summoned the roof tiles behind Weasley, coordinating them so that they would fly right into his head. The animagus' reflexes saved him, but as he was moving, Bella Summoned his wand. It didn't come to her, but the distraction was



enough for him to trip over the debris Tom had transfigured into a large stone for that very purpose.

He fell over, leaving himself wide open for an attack. Sensing victory, Tom formed the words of the Summoning Charm again, knowing Weasley would have trouble both holding onto it and defending against the rapid curse he could hear Bellatrix shouting at the same time.

But Weasley was infuriatingly quick. He lifted his hand and shot off a protego, foiling the plan. Tom gritted his teeth as the man raised his wand. He didn't know how well the other students were fairing; he had to finish this as soon as possible!

"Cruci – argh!" A rock smashed dead center into the underside of Weasley's wrist, the exact place where the nerves that controlled fingers were, forcing him to release his grip. The fourteen inch willow wand was knocked out of his grasp.

The three of them glanced up in shock. Harry was standing up again, tossing a rock up in the air and catching it in one hand. His emerald eyes were frosted with steely resolution.

"Wow," Bellatrix recovered first. "That was brilliant aim."

"I try," Harry remarked lightly, not taking his eyes off Ron's hand as the man rose to his feet. In a flash of understanding, Tom realized just how difficult it must have been for Harry to have done what he did and then endure Weasley's searching stare. The boy was unnaturally focused on Weasley's fingers, and Tom could see the slight cringe in his stance.

"So long, Weasley," Tom sneered both for his own pleasure and to keep Harry from his mixed feelings. "Your freedom dies here – Azkaban awaits. Imagine just how happy the dementors will be to reunite with you. They might even give you a Kiss." The toys waddled up to him again and started pounding on his shins.

Weasley snarled, kicking them away. "If I go, I'll make sure to take your soul with me. Avada Kedavra!" Tom leapt out of the way, about

to taunt him about his lousy aim, when he realized that the spell hadn't been aiming for him. Eerie green ripped past his arm and Tom whirled around. "Bella!" He already knew that he wouldn't be fast enough to transfigure something to stop the spell. Bellatrix's eyes widened and she barely managed to bring up her wand midway -

Harry slammed into her. They sailed through the air while the Killing Curse soared over their heads. Hugging her close to him to both protect her from the fall and make his shoulder roll work, he hit the ground, taking the brunt of the impact.

Tom had two seconds to stare in astonishment before he realized that Weasley had transformed, wandlessly Summoned his wand, and took off as he had fired the spell. Screaming obscenities in Parseltongue, he started to tear off after the dog when Potter's arm wrenched him back.

"Let him go," he spoke quietly.

"He has to pay-!"

"No." A haunted look flitted through Potter's eyes. "Not now. Not when you're like this."

"Tom." Bellatrix shakily stood. "He's right. We don't want to do anything unforgivable." Unforgivable. The word killed the brunt of his anger. He wouldn't let this become another Goblet of Fire incident, when he'd tried to cast the Killing Curse in Hadrian's mockery of a duel with him.

It hadn't worked; he'd merely given Longbottom, who was eagerly hovering about to watch far too close, a bloody nose. But that wasn't the point. Currently, he felt furious enough to cast the Cruciatus.

I promised myself never to do it again. So I won't. If I could restrain myself in the Department of Mysteries fiasco, I can here. That time, he had wanted Weasley's fiendish spouse to answer for killing Bellatrix's father. But he'd learnt his lesson. Not through Unforgivables.

Lowering his wand, he took a breath. "Evander..." Despite knowing who he was talking to, his pride was completely silent. "Thank you."

"You don't need to thank me." I just wish someone who wore my friend's face didn't cast that spell. "Are the Death Eaters all gone?"

"No. Though some portkeyed away." He grabbed Bellatrix's arm. "Are you alright?" Visions of the Killing Curse flying towards her sent a fresh lash of fury and panic through him. He scanned his wand over the wound Weasley had given her, and the bleeding stopped. If Harry had been even a second off...

"I'm fine. Just a scratch here and there."

"Don't be so blasé about it," he snapped slightly hysterically. "You – you almost died!"

"Tom–"

"Excuse me," Harry cut in. Tom glared savagely at him. "I know this is going to sound insensitive, but we can't afford to do this right now. Tom, I heard you were supposed to be stopping from Death Eater blockade?"

Reining in his emotions, Tom managed to respond, "I had predicted they would have one. It was the tactically sound route. But there was barely any resistance. We left them to the members of the DA and returned to the heart of the fray."

"Why wouldn't they be there?" It didn't make much sense. If anyone got to Dumbledore, the battle would be over.

Tom hesitated. He had strong suspicions, but he didn't want to lower moral by –

"Spit it out, Riddle. I can tell that you know why." Potter tilted his head in an angle that clearly marked a challenge.

Well, it wasn't exactly as if Harry was just another regular, scared student anyway. Tom gestured around him. "This is all a distraction.

All these people being cursed, wounded, all the destruction – it's all a distraction. Their goal couldn't have been to secure Hogsmead or they would have taken action to prevent anyone from getting Dumbledore."

"You mean to tell me that somewhere else in Britain there's another attack going on?!"

Bellatrix seized Tom's arm. "We have to alert Dumbledore! No one has managed to get back to-"

"Don't worry," Harry interrupted. "I gave three Ravenclaws the way to get back to Hogwarts through Honeydukes. They should have told him by now."

"That plan was your doing?" Pause. "There's a way to get to Hogwarts through there?"

"I should have guessed," Tom muttered. It had his signature all over it. He waved his wand and the toys, which had been hopping and cheering, returned back their original state.

"I'm guessing they made it?"

"Yes. Let's go," he started running towards Honeydukes. Once they got there, they could help clear out the attackers. If the resistance was low enough, they could start guide the wounded back to Hogwarts.

Fortunately, when they rounded the corner a block away, wands ready, there wasn't a Death Eater in sight. Bellatrix asked in surprise, "Dumbledore got here already?" If there weren't any Death Eaters lying on the floor and the students were as relaxed as they could be after an attack, they must have left. What other reason would they have gone except for Dumbledore's appearance?

"He didn't come through the passageway," Harry said darkly. "If he came here that quickly, he must have come through the Hogsmead fireplace, like the Death Eaters did. For a wizard like him, fighting his

way out of there would have been easy, if he had had any resistance.”

Tom glanced at him. “If he had’?” He was mildly amused to seeing the boy redden and mutter something about ‘taking care of it’. “Impressive, Evander,” he praised for the sole purpose of causing him to squirm some more. Potter, shy? He’d make sure to tease him for days.

Harry looked away. “Let’s just help everyone, shall we?”

Bellatrix almost laughed at the obvious attempt to change topics but the soft whimpers of the people around her stifled the urge. Without a word, the three of them went off to put their healing knowledge to good use.

Biting down the impulse to find Dumbledore and ask if the Order knew where else the Dark Lord had attacked, Harry walked towards the nearest injured person and offered to help them however he could. Information could wait for later, but then again, would Dumbledore actually tell him? The supposed carbon copy of the Dark Lord?

The elder Ron’s image flashed in his vision. Merlin, Harry’s jaw tightened. He never really realized just how loyal his friend was to him, alternate version or no, if he was willing to follow him against the law and even try to protect someone who looked exactly like, well, himself. If that made any sense.

And Harry had knocked his wand out of his hand.

Should he have done that? He felt like a traitor, but at the same time, he felt like he was doing the right thing. Doing the thing that his Ron would have wanted, too. And after he had heard the beginnings of that curse...he’d made his choice. A part of his wished he wasn’t so tied with his emotions. Perhaps if he had been Sorted into Slytherin in his own world, he would have learned to better distance himself from them. But if he really wanted to make a difference, he’d have to start learning.

Tom watched Harry for a moment. A rush of gratitude washed over him, and he made no effort to justify it away. Harry had helped them stop Weasley, saved Bellatrix, but not only that, he had saved an unknown, but assuredly large, number of others. Without him, Dumbledore would never have arrived.

Was he a fool to feel his faith in him rising?

A part of him was clinging to the possibility that Harry could be trying to get information out of him, just for the sake of logic. But he found that he didn't actually believe it. No one was, especially someone with Harry's personality, was that good of a liar. Keep your head, he murmured to himself. You still have to consider it. Besides, the pressure of choosing alliances will make him unpredictable. Yet after fighting alongside him, after seeing his willingness to protect others and the determination that had been blazing in his eyes, it was impossible to keep on seeing Harry as only a future Dark Lord anymore. He would still have to wary of course, but...

Startled gasps tore him out of his thoughts. Dumbledore strode through the street, his currently cerulean robes billowing behind him. The twinkle had hardened into a cold fire, and a flicker of pain streaked across his face as he surveyed the aftermath. Tom stood after an encouraging smile to the Hufflepuff he had been attending and quickly reached the headmaster.

"Sir," he began.

Dumbledore held up a hand. "Please, Tom. How many were injured?"

Tom suspected that what he really wanted to ask was 'how many were killed?' "I can't say for sure. From what I've seen, almost half will have to go to the Hospital Wing. Only a handful of the injuries are serious and none of them are life-threatening. A quarter of the students have minor cuts and bruises."

Dumbledore's eyes closed briefly in relief. "You did well, my boy. Hogsmead would have been in far worse shape if it hadn't had your leadership."

"It wasn't just me, professor," Tom found himself saying. "Eva – Harry," he lowered his voice, "was the one who sent the students to alert to you."

The headmaster smiled, seemingly unsurprised. "It is good to hear that young Harry was so helpful. He always was a courageous man." The smile faltered for a moment before returning upon seeing Harry directing a band of students towards Honeydukes' cellar. "And now to your question, Tom. If I am correct in my assumption, you were going to ask me whether this attack was a distraction or not?"

"Yes sir."

"I'm afraid so. Pius Thicknesse was murdered minutes ago just outside of London. I believe he was the target of the attack."

Pius Thicknesse. The man was the head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. "Headmaster..." A chill iced his bones. "Who succeeds Thicknesse?"

Dumbledore sighed. "It is Neville Longbottom."

Remus reached out and touched his fingertips to the crimson stone gleaming in the offered hand. A smile crept onto his face as he felt youth well up inside him, fading the wrinkles crinkling his skin and painting back color in his lightening hair. His thirty five year old appearance melted into a late twenties one. "Thank you, Hadrian."

"You're in my Inner Circle, Remus," the Dark Lord returned. "You've earned his privilege." The werewolf grasped his hand for a moment before apparating away, leaving only three people left in the room.

The doors to the reception chamber were propelled forwards. "Hadrian," Ron called. Hadrian turned, Banishing the Philosopher's Stone back into its keeping place. "One of your clones is running about at Hogsmead." He received a raised eyebrow in reply.

"Damn," the boy that had been talking to Hermione scowled. "I'd hoped the Brat Who Lived and his sidekick Wonder Woman would've gotten to him in time."

Ron frowned at him. "You're from the Map?" he demanded suspiciously, eyeing the Slytherin robes in distaste. Rose and Hugo had been in charge of the Map horcrux since their fourth year, so he thought he knew almost as much as they did about its happenings. "They didn't tell me that you were body snatching."

"I'm not," came the horcrux's reply. "You know my duty is to spy in Dumbledore's very own stronghold, not manifest and become a soldier. I just came across an interesting addition to the Hogwarts populace, and decided taking over Antonin Dolohov's body for a while to let me keep a closer look on him. I thought he might be another me, but..." He shrugged.

"What are you saying, he isn't?" Ron turned to Hadrian. "He looked like an exact replica of you."

"Horcrux here," Hadrian gestured to his soul fragment, "informs me that Riddle is at odds with the boy and Dumbledore has forced him to share a dorm with him."

"I still think you should have told us earlier," Hermione frowned.

Horcrux disagreed. "I might be sixteen, but I'm still you," he motioned at Hadrian. "I don't have to run to myself every time something strange happens. It would get too messy. Anyway, Ron, he goes by the name 'Evander Harrison James' as well."

Recognition flashed in Ron's eyes. "You used that name whenever we were sneaking out of Hogsmead to Diagon Alley."

"I haven't managed to see if he has a lightning shaped scar on his forehead," the horcrux explained, "but it makes sense that he would hide it."

"Why would he have a lightning scar?" Ron asked, startled.



"Oh honestly Ron," Hermione huffed. "He's obviously not a horcrux, yet Dumbledore treats him as one, meaning that he doesn't know what he is either. The boy's sudden appearance clearly isn't Dumbledore's doing. Then he uses the same exact name that Hadrian used to use as an alias and, most importantly, appeared immediately after the Hallows were unlocked."

Ron looked between the three of them. "Are you saying," he started slowly, "that this bloke is Hadrian from another universe?"

"Precisely."

"There are people who consider Death another dimension," Hadrian offered. "If that is true, why would Death be the only dimension the person who unlocks the Hallows could travel to? The portal I created closed prematurely. If all of the Hallows recognized me as their master, which they should have, then they would only close if I either went through or closed the portal myself. Assuming our theory is correct, technically I did go through. It just wasn't the right me."

Ron shook his head. "That's one insane theory mate."

"Luna," Hermione admitted reluctantly, "says that it makes sense, and she is a member of the Will of Peverell. She should know how this works."

"The necklace the boy wears confirms it," the Dark Lord added, absently twirling his wand. For Ron's benefit, he elucidated, "Luna said that, for emergencies, the Will has a few runic necklaces that allow them to travel to an alternate universe and back. Someone in 'Evander James's world must have given it to him."

Hermione settled herself into the armchair nearby, leaning her head back. "What are we going to do about this recent development?"

Hadrian merely tilted his head towards Horcrux who, seeing as they were the same person, understood. "I'll find a way to get the Death Eaters into Hogwarts. We can't use the Vanishing Cabinet again, but I'll think of another option. We'll bring him here," the piece of the Dark Lord's soul nodded. "You can never have too many campeadori."

“Not to mention that it will be interesting,” Hadrian continued. “How many people get the chance to meet their younger selves?”

“What if he doesn’t want to help us?”

“You think he would join Dumbledore, ‘Mione?”

“Don’t look so offended,” Hermione scolded. “You know it’s a possibility. He is the Boy Who Lived in his world, and we are the supposed Dark wizards and witches here.”

“Then we’ll just have to educate him. But really, I don’t see why Harry would be against what we’re doing. Most of our friends have been wronged by purebloods.” Hmm, the semantics on this were going to become confusing. “In the meanwhile, let us celebrate the death of that bumbler Pius Thicknesse and congratulate Neville on his recent promotion. With the success we’re having, it won’t be long before our strategy is accomplished.”

A/N: Hmm...I keep on feeling like I've made someone call Harry "Harry" when they shouldn't, but I haven't been able to find it. Oh well, if you find it, please let me know! So, here are my questions for this chapter if anyone wants to leave some feedback:

1. General comments about OOCness or the lack thereof this time. Tom was the one I was most concerned with though...
2. Were the fight scenes too long? I've read stories with incredibly long ones, and I've personally always liked them, but it'd be nice to know how many people feel the same.
3. Harry's ability to fight. In my mind, he is a talented dueler (thus the semi Powerful!Harry status), but it's his creativity that really helps him win. Did you think he was too good?
4. Other comments?

## Chapter Eleven

Nine days passed since the Hogsmeade Incident, the Battle of Hogsmeade, or whatever other melodramatic name it was called by, passed. Since then, the younger years had declared a Stare in Awe at Evander and Tom Marathorn. With the way Harry was dealing with it, though, it looked like he'd be more willing to face a round of Death Eaters again than endure the not-so-subtle praise.

"Checkmate." Tom calmly moved his rook and Slughorn's eyes widened.

"Good show, Tom! I wouldn't have thought of that one." Slughorn, who had drifted into the Slytherin Common Room for his inevitable chess defeat, looked far from disappointed. "But then again, I shouldn't be surprised. I've heard from Dumbledore that you give him a run for his money!"

Tom gave a smile that a scowling Harry noticed attracted another swarm of admirers. Slughorn had been stalking the two of them ever since the gossip had ravaged the school, seeking every opportunity to praise them until Harry was convinced he was attempting to subject them to the verbal form of the Cruciatus. "You give me too much credit, professor. I'm just exceedingly lucky."

"Such modesty!" Slughorn beamed.

Harry sank farther and farther behind the book he was pretending to read in a futile effort to ignore all the hero-worshipping stares. Here it comes, he muttered to himself.

"But there's a thin line between humility and outright lies, Tom, and after you said that about your work in Hogsmeade, I would have to say that you're becoming quite a liar."

"Thank you, professor, but you know I couldn't have done anything without-"

Don't you dare! Harry half screamed to himself, poking his head above his book to stab Tom with a glare. The boy only smirked at him.

“-Evander’s help.”

I hate you.

Slughorn rounded on Harry. “Evander-”

“I have to go to the library!” Harry announced. Loudly. He winced. Tom barely hid his mirth. Harry attempted a civilized smile and would later reflect that it was a failure to rival his Potions OWL. He jerked to his feet and Tom smoothly stood in response.

Harry tossed him an annoyed look before rolling his eyes. Tom might have started being rather...friendly? No, that was too strong of a word. Civil? Eh, not really. It was a word in the middle of the two; both of them had begun what could tentatively be called a hesitant friendship. It was still laden with second guessing ever now and then, but it was slowly progressing.

But that didn’t mean he’d stopped playing nanny.

“Sorry professor. Perhaps we can continue later?” Tom asked. “Evander can’t find his way out of a paper bag, let alone the library.” Once again, Harry scowled.

“Of course, my boy. Tomorrow?”

“Certainly.” Tom strode out of the Common Room after Harry, who was already climbing out of the port hole.

“Must you embarrass me?” he muttered, doing a 180 degree turn the moment he saw a drove of first years approach. If he heard one more whisper about his dueling skills...

“Naturally. I can’t deny how much fun it is. I would have thought that you would have been used to the attention.”

“Not all of us bask under the spotlight, Riddle,” Harry returned. Then a thought occurred to him. He glanced with dread behind him. Thankfully, the first years and anyone else who might be lurking in

the halls weren't there. "Wait, you said you thought I would be used to the attention? Does that mean you believe my theory?"

Reluctantly, Tom admitted, "I don't believe your absurd theory. However, professor Dumbledore has validated it..." Receiving that owl yesterday had been unpleasant.

"What's it going to take to convince you?"

"More than stubborn insistence. Besides, I still like my Harebrained Harry theory. It has a certain ring to it."

Harry sighed. "One day, I'm going to be saying 'I told you so' and you're-" He paused and cocking his head to the side, listening.

"What is it?"

"...Footsteps. Two pairs. Down the corridor." Harry shrugged at Tom's expression. "I've gotten better at hearing things nowadays. Don't suppose you know why?"

"I'm afraid not," Tom lied. He hoped that Harry wouldn't ask anyone else, because nearly everyone would be able to give him an answer. Campeador abilities were hardly a secret since Hadrian's 'debut' over a decade ago. Harry's, as Dumbledore and he had predicted, were increasing.

"The hall's deserted now. We can talk again."

"What would we ever do without our human sneakoscope?" Tom spoke dryly. "We're not actually going to the library, are we?"

"Given how you've all but surgically attached yourself to me, you really need to ask about my habits?"

"No. I just don't want to go onto the Quidditch pitch again."

"You're just scared of heights."

"I am not. I just don't like Quidditch. I could be doing so much more with my time. Moreover, I've had enough of hearing about it from Bellatrix."

"Come on."

"Wait!" He successfully made Harry stop. "You don't want to listen to Creeping Creevy praise your flying skills, do you? I'd have thought you'd had enough extolling from the..." he trailed off. The former Gryffindor was pale at the mention of the name. Had Harry heard of Creevy?

"Don't call him that," Harry said finally. "But alright. You get to pick this time. Just nowhere with a tendency to draw flocks of admirers."

While Tom inwardly cheered for his victory, the two pairs of footsteps were walking through the hall.

"You're mad, Lucius." Bellatrix followed him as he led her through an empty corridor paving the dungeons.

"I'm not 'mad', Bella," he replied with his typical nonchalance. "I have a perfectly reasonable ludicrous theory." She raised an eyebrow. "I am not making unfounded accusations." Lucius stopped and leaned against the wall, his arms crossed against his chest.

Raking a hand through her dark locks, Bellatrix sighed. "Alright, fine. I admit it makes sense. But it's just – it's – come on, Lucius! You're practically suggesting that Evander is the Dark Lord's heir! That's-"

"Keep your voice down." He glanced down either side of the hall for a moment.

"Alright," Bellatrix conceded, "I admit that the whole cup incident is hard to ignore, not to mention his speed and the accuracy of his aim back in the Attack on Hogsmeade, but I think that Tom would tell us if the new exchange student was actually Dark Lord Junior."

"Really."

"He knows we're trust worthy."

"But our reactions to such a secret are not. He wouldn't want to risk it, especially knowing our...history with the Dark Lord. Tom also has an independent character. He doesn't like involving people unless absolutely necessary." The lull in conversation summoned unwanted memories of the relatives they had lost. "I wager," Lucius began, half to break the silence and half to vent, "that Evander speaks not a word of Spanish. I merely need a way to test him without making it obvious..."

"There is another option."

"Yes?"

"Maybe he's just another campeador. If I were one, I certainly wouldn't say anything knowing who the talent is identified with."

"Ha!" Lucius scoffed. He pushed himself off the wall, eyes cooling. In a low voice, he demanded, "What are the chances of another campeador existing? You know how rare they are, Bella. There hasn't been one in England for one thousand years. The most recent one was in Italy and died in a tournament during the 1700s. It isn't possible."

"Lucius, he saved my life. Even if he is some spawn of Hadrian's, hasn't he proven himself different?" She paused for a moment before adding, "He isn't anti-pureblood either. I admit, in the beginning, it seem like he particularly disliked Slytherins, but now I think that must have been based off of something he'd heard before coming to Hogwarts."

"Even if I am wrong, Tom is keeping something from us. Normally I wouldn't pry; I respect his judgment. But he obviously wants to keep an eye on-"

"Lucius."

"Yes?"

Delicately, she began, "Are you sure you're not just looking for someone to accuse because of..." His eyes narrowed slightly, but she forced herself to finish. "...because of your parents?"

"My parents' kidnapping has little to do with it. I am simply concerned."

"Say that any stiffer," she sighed, "and I'd think you were a statue."

"You doubt me?"

"I think you might be biased," she confessed. "Look, Evander worked with us in Hogsmeade. I know that he has something to hide and that Tom is helping him hide it. But if Tom knows, Dumbledore knows, and if they haven't told us, we couldn't be significantly threatened by this."

Lucius was about to retort when the lurch of shifting stones caused him to stop. Voices emerged from one of Hogwarts' many hidden passages that was around the corner. The two were immediately alert.

"-trust you have all the faithful Gryffindors informed?"

Was that Andy's voice?

"Everyone who's supposed to know knows," a girl quipped. "I wish we didn't have to let the others panic during the attack..."

"It's the sacrifice we have to make for credibility. At least Harry won't be in the line of fire, like in the Hogsmeade Incident."

Attack? Bellatrix felt the air in her lungs chill. Glancing to her side, she could see Lucius' jaw clench. Who is Harry? There isn't anyone called that currently in Hogwarts.

"Time to go to the owlery." Andy's voice had an ironic humor to it that they hadn't known he could use. "Let's go transfigure those owls back."



"I'm still surprised you managed to sneak an entire squadron through the wards," another boy spoke, his voice dry and disturbingly familiar.

"Well, they were instructed not to hurt any students. Of course, that will change once they're inside and I give them their new orders-" Bellatrix, straining her ears to hear better, took a few steps forward. The speaker immediately stopped.

For a moment she had the wild idea what he had heard her. But that was ridiculous. Normal people couldn't hear so well-

Five wands rounded the corner, pointing straight at them. Lucius stiffened and Bellatrix bit back a growl once the shock had worn off and they recognized the owners of said wands.

"Well look who it is," Andy grinned maliciously, somersaulting his wand. "It's the Brat Who Lived's sidekicks: Wonder Woman and Pretty Boy. How is the Head Boy doing today? He won't be doing too well by the end of it, that's for sure."

Lucius sneered. "I see the so-called Awesome Foursome has been sneaking around passages. One might think you had something to hide...but I suppose that has become readily apparent, has it not, Antonin?"

"By Salazar's name," Bellatrix snapped, "what are you doing talking to them? And what on earth were you saying? You're planning to attack Hogwarts?" There was no point in feigning ignorance; they were obviously not going to be given the benefit of the doubt.

"Shut up, Bellabitch," Jasmine jabbed her wand at Bellatrix's throat, stepping closer. "You've heard enough."

Andy glided forward, a careless smile flourishing on his lips. The striking contrast to the usual way he walked had Lucius automatically reaching for his wand. His feet tapped the stone floor lightly, as if at any moment he could snap into motion. Smooth self-assurance coated every step.

Lucius felt his frigid, proud Malfoy mask slide over him as Antonin slowed to a stop a meter away. The foreign tilt of Antonin's head and his posture had his instincts screaming.

"Tell me, Antonin," Lucius' tone was whispered with a deadly sort of softness, "what exactly are you doing?"

"I suppose in your eyes it would look like I was betraying you," Antonin shrugged absently. "But in actuality, I'm just doing my duty – leave that hand where it is, albino degenerate – and making sure that neither of you talk before it's due." On cue, Jasmine, Lupin, Hugo, and Rose opened their mouths to curse them.

Lucius' and Bellatrix's hands leaped for their wands. "Defod-" Lucius only had time to widen his eyes before what seemed like a blur soared from Antonin's place, seized his arm, drew it to the side, and hauled him over his hip.

Air tore out of Lucius' chest as he slammed into the floor, his wand flying. Bellatrix had only realized what had happened when a hand descended on hers, rolled her palm up, and twisted downwards. With a cry, her fingers released her wand and the hold forced her to her knees.

"What a shame," Andy sighed dramatically. "And I thought that Slytherins had a knack for survival."

"Incarcerous," Jasmine lazily cast the spell on Lucius. She and Hugo wrenched him to his feet, not bothering to be gentle.

"You despicable traitor, Antonin!"

"Temper, temper, Pretty Boy." Absently he rotated his grip. Bella struggled to stifle a gasp of pain. "You don't want sidekick number two to get hurt now, would you?" He arched an eyebrow in challenge and stepped forward. Bella was immediately forced to crawl after him.

"Stop it!" Lucius hissed.

"You filthy monster," she shouted at Andy, her cheeks burning in humiliation.

Andy smiled in a mockery of geniality down at her. Swiftly, he dropped her hand, yanked her halfway up by her sleeve, and shoved her towards Lupin and Rose. "Take the trash out to the room of Requirement. I'm sure you can find a garbage dump to keep them in for now."

Lupin Stunned her. "Levicorpus," he intoned.

Jasmine dug her wand into Lucius' neck. "Well Malfoy," she grinned, "you've always wanted to find out how JAERA creates its meeting place, haven't you? Now you're going to learn, firsthand."

Antonin Summoned the two fallen wands and tossed them at her. "Well, I could stay and gloat, but I have Death Eaters to transfigure. Stay with them. I'm sure that my other half – third? Fourth? Whatever the number is now - will greatly enjoy the entertainment."

"Antonin!" Lucius snarled. He stopped. "You-"

"Oh, did I forget to mention?" Antonin looked back at him over his shoulder, a feral grin etched on his face. "I'm not Andy Dolohov. Adios, inbreeds. I'll be seeing you after I get this party started."

He laughed and headed towards the owlery, ignoring the prisoner's vilifications. This was just too fun. After all those hours pretending, he could finally give them a piece of his mind before they were disposed of. Slimy snakes.

Cutting the time down by slipping through secret passageways, he passed throngs of students and the occasional patrolling teacher until he reached his destination. No one else was there, and his senses told him that there weren't any nearby, either.

"Hello," Horcrux greeted the birds. Twenty seven barn owls turned their heads to face him while the rest just continued riffling for bugs in their feathers. "Sorry for the delay and the whole ordeal of carrying messages. Welcome back to your humanity, Alpha Squad." He

waved his wand, the incantation weaving over the owls as they fluttered down to the floor.

Immediately the spell took affect; dull brown faded into human tones and feathers melted into skin. The owls rose up and morphed until fourteen people stood in their places, poised and ready. Thirteen of them fell into slight bows at the waist.

“Excellent work,” Hadrian smiled at him, waving a hand that indicated that his followers should stand. “You have the wands?”

“Do you even need to ask?” Horcrux enlarged a bag that had been shrunk and then tied to his belt. He reached inside and held up the wands one by one, their respective owners coming to grab them.

“Alpha Squad,” Hadrian turned. “I formerly told you that our intent was not to harm the students. That was partially a lie. Now that we are past the wards, I tell you this: harm anyone who gets in your way. Team leaders, take your fireteams (2). You know what to do.”

Horcrux gave his older counterpart a joking salute and rushed off to accomplish his next task: find the so-called Evander Harrison James.

Harry was still wandering aimlessly around the halls. He’d considered going to Hagrid’s hut, but since Hagrid didn’t even seem to be here, given that Tom hadn’t expelled him in this dimension, there wasn’t any point. He’d never been too interested in herbology so the greenhouse was out, he wasn’t in the mood to deal with venerating house elves in the kitchen, and he’d already said that they weren’t going to the library and planned to keep it that way.

“You know, there is this book I wanted to look through...”

“No.”

“Just because Madam Pince kicked you out last time, doesn’t mean you can deprive me, Evander.”

"The answer's still no. I'm sick of reading up on the 'supposed' existence of alternate universes. Besides, even if they had something useful, it wouldn't be at Hogwarts. It'd be in the Department of Mysteries."

A wide-eyed student second year rushed by, her hair flapping out behind her. "No running in the halls," Tom reminded mildly. The student didn't seem to hear. Tom was slightly miffed.

Then another clump of people flew by him. "Don't run in the halls..." he repeated wryly. "For goodness sake, you'd think they'd remember that rule when the Head Boy is standing right here..."

Harry smirked and was about to retort when an entire flood of students rampaged past them. "What the-? Ow! Hey!" He rubbed his arm, glaring at the mob. "What's got their knickers in a twist?"

"No running in the – oh, forget it. Excuse me," he grabbed a sixth year shooting past them. "Do you know what's-?" The boy yelped, thrashing about, and Tom released him in surprise. He and Harry just stared as they became even more endangered of being trampled by the stampede that was swiftly gallivanting by them.

"Something tells me," Harry muttered, "that this isn't because of dungbombs."

"Let's go." Tom dodged an incoming human missile and started to move against the tide. "Excuse me. Pardon. Coming through...ow! Salazar and Morgana!" Scowling, Tom waved his wand. The charging bodies were flung to the side. Ignoring the cries of students acquainting themselves with the walls, he strode through the newly created path, almost impressed with the sheer chaos. "This is ridiculous."

"No objections here," Harry agreed. They managed to make it to the end of the hall, where the stairwells and all the upper and lower floors were visible. Traffic cut in front of them, but this time both of them could make out...screams? Straining his ears, Harry frowned. "Some people are casting spells out there. Dangerous ones, too."

Tom's hand slid down to his wand. "This isn't an ordinary brawl."

Harry didn't need to confirm it. A flash of gold and black on the upper level told them all they needed to know. "Death Eaters!" Harry started to dash toward but Tom yanked him back. "What are you waiting for? We need to-!"

"You can't just rush in like that. There are over a thousand students in this school, and none of them have any idea of what to do or where to go. Additionally, they're panicking. They need people to lead them to safety and to protect them while they move there."

Harry twitched, glancing back at the fray. McGonagall was dueling with one of the black cloaked figures, Flitwick whirling at her side. Forcing himself to acknowledge the logic, he gave a curt nod.

"Good. Now come." Rapidly, Tom analyzed where he could be the most help; he couldn't be sure that all the prefects would have enough sense or backbone to remember their duties. Bella and Lucius would; he didn't need to worry about Slytherin being in disarray. The Gryffindors...well, they probably knew about this beforehand, and even if they didn't, they were known for bravery. He knew the two Hufflepuff prefects well enough to know that they could be relied on. The Ravenclaws would probably be the first to panic, yet at the same time, their students would be the most likely to listen to authority figures in their panic instead of act rashly.

"Prefects!" McGonagall's voice echoed throughout the school, courtesy of the sonorous charm. "Escort your students to their common rooms! I repeat, escort your students to their common rooms!"

"Won't that be the first place the Death Eaters look?" Harry asked as Tom started running to the direction of the dungeons. Lucius and Bella might have them under control, but if anyone was a target here, it would be the Snakes. Additional help wouldn't be rejected.

"Standard procedure. Besides, it's better than being trapped and surrounded in the Great Hall," Tom answered. "Not to mention that

hardly anyone knows about the Room of Requirement. The same goes for Hogwarts' secret passages."

Harry jumped out of the way of an incoming student and paused. He recognized this hall. If he said the right password, one of the statues would slide away, leading to a passage outside the Potions classroom. "Tom!" he called and shouted out the password to the statue. Changing directions, Tom dashed towards him and the two of them hurried through the entrance of the passageway.

"When do you even have time to find these places?"

"I didn't find them," Harry told him. "I had this map that knew practically every hidden part of Hogwarts."

"A map?" Unease trickled down Tom's spine. Could it be the same map that Andy had?

"Yeah. Hold on. Stairs." Swiping off a cobweb that had gotten tangled in his hair, Harry leapt the sudden slope down to the bottom. He swept his eyes over the place. "Left, if I remember correctly."

"You brought us in here and you aren't even certain whether we're going in the right direction?"

"I'm reasonably sure," Harry defended. "Besides, if we take a wrong turn, we'll just end up in the Charms classroom. No one will be in there to see us."

"...This was a bad idea." Wondering why he was still letting Harry lead them, Tom caught up to the boy as he took the left.

A few paces later, Harry stopped them at a dead end. He poked the wall and it parted, leaving the unpleasant sight of the dungeons and the dour Potions classroom door in front of them. "Hey, what do you know? I was right." A throng of students raced past.

"Congratulations."

"There's no need for sarcasm, Riddle." Harry stepped out of the way and avoided the barrage of bodies. "Why aren't Bellatrix and Lucius doing their jobs? Aren't they prefects? It's chaos over here!"

Tom frowned. "I don't know, but we better make up for it." Raising his voice, he instructed, "Everyone, calmly and slowly make your way to the Slytherin Common Room. There is no need to panic; the teachers have everything under control." Harry tried not to contradict him. The students, recognizing their Head Boy and Boy Who Lived, listened to him somewhat. The panic wasn't fading, but it was becoming visibly restrained. "Make your way to the Common Room in an orderly fashion." Tom's voice was slow and confident. "The intruders are being dealt with." The crowd was tamed under the tone.

Successfully having reduced the wild running into jogging, Tom sighed. "Evander, I'm going to lead them away. There should be a few stragglers joining us. Calm them down and tell them where to go."

"Sure."

"And if you need to get their attention, do not use loud noises. They'll just panic again."

"Got it."

"And-"

"Tom, I think I can handle it." Harry pointed to the front of what could roughly be called a line. "You better take care of them before they forget where their own common room is." With a grin, Harry made his way down the hall to take care of the incoming students. He wasn't a Head Boy or even a prefect, but he was sure they would listen to him. His fame might be annoying, but it worked for some things, and getting attention was one of them.

"Please walk slowly to the Common Room," Harry attempted to imitate the pacifying voice that came so easily to Tom. He had a passable result. The flock of younger years slowed somewhat. "You'll be safe there." For good measure, he added, "No one will be able to



get in without the password.” Is that even true? Never mind. Let’s just say it is.

Grateful students scurried past him. Soon the tide was ebbing, and Harry was about to follow them back when another character appeared down the corridor, running effortlessly towards him. “Hi Andy,” Harry greeted. Andy hardly looked like he was going to have an episode, so Harry just told him, “Everyone’s in the common room.”

“Yes, I heard the announcement,” Andy said, running a hand through his hair. “I actually came to find you.”

“Me? Why...you thought I was missing?”

“I just didn’t know where you where.”

Harry started to thank him for his concern when a thought occurred to him. “Wait, Andy – do you know anyone else missing? Like Bellatrix and Lucius?” Maybe that was why the students were in disarray - they couldn’t do their prefect duties if they weren’t there!

Andy arched an eyebrow, his head tilted to the side and an amused smile curving his lips. “Bellatrix and Lucius are being held in the Room of Requirement. It’s the Death Eater’s temporary storage room.”

“The Room of Requirement?” Harry echoed, thinking out loud. “I have to go and get them then! They – wait, did the Death Eaters get in through the vanishing cabinet?”

“No. That was last year. This year it was owls. Hogwarts can be breached in so many different ways, as long as the person coming in doesn’t intend harm.”

Harry glanced behind him and saw Tom heading towards them. He grabbed his wand and was about to shout to him that he was going to get the two prefects, when he froze. Turning back to Andy, he asked, “How do you know all this?”

“You haven’t figured out yet?” Andy rolled his eyes, the uncharacteristic motion surprising Harry. “To borrow an overused cliché and be a stereotypically vague wizard, ‘you are me and I am you’.”

“What do you-?”

“Andy.” Tom had reached them. “I need to borrow the Marauder’s Map. The Slytherin Common Room isn’t safe enough; we need a new hiding place.”

The Marauder’s Map..!

‘You are me and I am you’...

Flashes of the diary and the basilisk ripped through Harry’s mind. Blood drained from his face. He looked at Andy a second time and it was like a blindfold had been yanked from his eyes. The new stance, the unusually calm and confident way he talked and held himself...it all fit. The Map is a horcrux. The Map is a horcrux. Andy is being possessed by a horcrux!

‘Andy’ sneered, startling Tom. “I’m afraid I don’t have it, Tom. I guess you’ll just have to-”

“Stupefy!”

The horcrux had less than a second to register what had happened before he crumpled on the floor.

“What,” Tom demanded incredulously, “was that for?”

“I know what I’m doing!” Harry dropped to his knees and started frisking Andy. As he turned out a pocket, he insisted, “Trust me!”

Tom hissed, pointing his wand at the fallen boy, “Potter, I told you not to disrespect my friends, and attacking them surely qualifies-”

"Please, just trust me." Tom's expression didn't change but he didn't move to undo the spell either. "Tom - if there is one time where you can be sure I'm being truthful, it's now. Don't enervate him!"

Tom's wand was still leveled at Andy. Harry looked away from him and, very reluctantly, reached into the side pocket. "Potter," Tom finally said. "You will be explaining yourself."

"I will. I promise. Just – yes!" He pulled out the infamous blank piece of parchment, holding it up to the light. "I solemnly swear that I'm up to no good."

Tom's eyes widened. "How did you know about that?"

But Harry wasn't paying attention to him. He was staring between Andy and the Map. "So it's true," he whispered. "He's the Map." A puzzled Tom decided not to interrupt, but instead stored that cryptic sentence away for later contemplation.

"If you're done mugging him, Potter," Tom scowled, "we have a hiding place to find."

What was either an idea or a bludger hit Harry in the back of the head. "Oh...Merlin, how could I have not thought of that? Argh! All this time I could have proven..!"

"Could we allocate the mental breakdown to a later time?"

"I know where we can hide! I can't believe I didn't think about this before!"

"Do enlighten me."

Harry tried to make his next proclamation not sound as melodramatic as it did, but failed. "The Chamber of Secrets." Tom just stared at him. "I'm serious!"

"You're telling me that you know where the fabled Chamber of Secrets is."

“Yes.”

“The Chamber that no one in one thousand years has found.”

“Yes!”

“The Chamber that I’ve spent seven years looking for in my limited free time, and found not a trace of?”

Harry glared. “I know where it is! Look, no one else found out about it because no one else is a par...” Oops. “Um, paragon of...uh, detective work.” Great answer, Potter.

“Care to explain that more clear-?”

“We’re wasting time! Didn’t you say we need a hiding place? I’m telling you, I know where the Chamber is. Just give me a chance.”

“Potter-”

“Why would I lie about this?”

Tom could think of several reasons why. None of them were benevolent. But they were wasting time, and any place was better than the Slytherin Common Room. At this point, Harry could lead them into a broom closet for all he cared. Besides...he looked genuine, if not bordering on pleading. Oh thing Tom knew for certain the first day he had seen Harry was that he was no Grammy nominee. If 'Harebrained' Harry was consciously aware of telling a lie, he'd eat his hand. “I have to get something from my dorm. Map out the best route to this so-called Chamber.” Tom started running. “And for goodness sake, take Andy with you!”

“Wait!” Harry started. “You can’t just-!” Tom vanished around the corner. “Argh! I can’t believe you’re getting something from your dorm at a time like this...” Fine. He was going to be left alone. Great. He could do this. Find the best route. Alright. No problem.

Harry cast a silent mobilicorpus on the horcrux and levitated him down the hall. Deciding to dump him in the Common Room for now, he stepped inside. Immediately he was bombarded with questions.

“Evander, what’s happening?”

“Are there really Death Eaters here?!”

“What are we going to do?”

Ugh. And Slytherins were supposed to be the dignified House. The entrance shutting behind him, Harry cast a sonorous on himself. “Everyone,” he winced in pain as his sensitive ears shrieked in protest. “Could I have some quiet please? I can’t answer any questions if I can’t understand them.” The change in volume was barely noticeable. “Hey, could you try and talk one at a time? I can’t – wait, are any of you even-?” Harry voted for a meaner approach that preyed on some pride. That should do the trick. “By Salazar, get a hold of yourselves! You’re Slytherins, not a bunch of headless chickens!”

Silence was achieved. Some were flushing in embarrassment while others were starting to protest. With the spell on him, Harry drowned them all out. It was time for some positive reinforcement. “That’s better. Glad you can keep your wits about you.” Was that compliment too obvious, or did it just sound insulting and/or sarcastic? He shrugged off the self-criticism. No time for that. “Here’s what I know: Tom is going to be back-”

“He left?”

“Please,” Harry struggled to keep his temper in check. He had to remember that not everyone was used to high stress situations. They had never been the Boy Who Lived, nor been in battle. It wasn’t their fault that they were scared. “Let me finish. Tom will be back. He has just gone to get something from his dorm. We’re going to have to leave here – no! Let me finish! We’re going to have to leave here because...” let’s face it, Slytherins are prime targets. Somehow, Harry doubted that would be the appropriate thing to say. “...we know a better spot than no one, and I mean no one, knows about. We’ll be

completely safe there-" if you consider rooming with a basilisk safe "-until everything is over."

Someone asked quietly, "Are they really Death Eaters?" Harry recognized him as McNair.

Time for a political answer, he coached himself. "Does it matter? Whoever they are, they've been deemed a risk to our safety. We need to go."

Though the crowd was acting far more subdued, Harry felt the probability of an uproar spike as another person stated, "If we go out there, we could get cursed." Or worse. The sentence was left hanging.

Thankfully, Harry was saved from answering.

"Jasmine Black knows the password! She'll let them in-"

Alright, not so thankfully.

"Hey!" Certain this was going to turn into an anti-Gryffindor prep rally, Harry caught their attention again. "Look, whether that's true or not, the fact is that someone out there knows the password to our common room. We can't stay here. I've got a plan to get us out with minimal casualties."

...And it would be nice if that plan showed itself right about now.

The porthole opened and Harry was rescued from revealing his nonexistent plan. Every single wand was flung in the direction of the newcomer, who Harry was relieved to find was Tom.

And an addition.

"What the Hell is that thing?" someone blurted, completely obliterating any chance of patrician calm that had lingered. Harry's jaw joined all the studious Slytherins' down on the floor. He had brought the cockatrice with him!

Tom wrapped the cat-sized cockatrice around his shoulders. "This-" is the reason I might be expelled tomorrow "-is a pet of mine. Her name is Nagini."

Harry was torn between laughter and a groan at the name. It was almost sad that he had guessed the name right.

"Look now?"

"May I look now'," Tom corrected, clapping a hand over its closed but eagerly roaming eyes. "And no. Not yet." Nagini made a face that could roughly be translated to moping and flicked its tongue in the air. Suddenly, the expression froze.

Uh oh. Slowly backing away and trying not to notice the awed expressions of the younger years/Tom's worshippers, Harry prayed that Nagini wasn't doing what he thought it was. Namely, sniffing out his scent (1).

Tom swept his gaze over the crowd and raised an eyebrow. "You didn't organize them?"

"I was kind of busy preventing a mass panic attack."

He rolled his eyes. "Must I do everything?" Before Harry could retort, he addressed the crowd. "We are going to create an almost impenetrable defense."

Now that's a big claim, Harry commented to himself.

"It is a configuration used by Roman legions in the days of the empire: the testudo formation." Hadrian isn't the only one who can utilize warfare tactics. "First years: make a line in front of me. Second years, make a line next to them." As they scrambled to their positions, Tom gratefully noted that the numbers were small enough that they could fit the third years in the group as well.

The testudo formation, popularly used in sieges, was also called the tortoise formation for a reason. In battle, soldiers would align themselves in a set of rows and columns side by side, eventually

forming a tight rectangle. The soldiers in the front lines placed their shields in front of them. The soldiers in the second row behind them placed shields over the front lines' heads, which were large enough to cover their heads as well, the third did the same, and so on and so forth.

Unfortunately, this left the sides and the back of the formation unprotected, but since they were using protego shields, which more experienced wizards and witches could expand, Tom took the liberty to modify the formation. He had the anyone fourth years and up make up the back and side lines farthest on either side and had them twist so that they would be projecting their shields over their unprotected side.

Critically inspecting the Slytherins, who Tom was forced to split into three groups so that they would fit through the halls, he realized that the younger students hidden in the center wouldn't be able to put up shields. Some of them hadn't learnt it, some didn't have enough practice, and others didn't have the magical strength at this point in time to cast one. Others just had flimsy ones.

Well, spells didn't bounce, so it shouldn't be much of an issue.

Where are Lucius and Bella? Of the members of the Defense Association he had helped form in his third year and headed starting his fifth, they were the most competent duelers. Of course, the testudo formation made dueling skill essentially irrelevant – the only necessity was the ability to cast a solid protego – but they were also two of the most powerful seventh years. Anything would have helped.

Focus on the task at hand. You cannot afford distractions.

Harry let Tom's irresistible charisma work its miracles as he circled around the formation. Inwardly, he was impressed. Maybe this arrangement of Tom's would live up to its 'impenetrable defense' claim after all...if the students didn't break formation from fright or stumble when they were turning a corner.

"Evander." It seemed Tom was finished weaving his spell over the crowd. He started walking towards Harry, who took an involuntary



step backwards as Nagini happily raised its head up, tongue waving in the sky again. Tom gave him an amused look. "Am I frightening you?"

"Er, no," Harry responded, debating how he was going to keep away from Nagini and not look like he was running away from Tom at the same time. Tom took a step forward. Harry automatically took a step back. "Personal space, Riddle!" he blurted without thinking.

"...There are three meters separating us."

Harry flushed. "I'm claustrophobic?"

"Really."

"Alright, how about 'I don't like snakes'?"

"You're scared of snakes," he deadpanned.

"No! I just don't...like...them..?"

"P – James, stop being ridiculous." By now, the formation was threatening to crumble, judging by the amount of people straining their heads to see what the fuss was about. Harry glanced at them and back at Tom. Reluctantly, he stood his ground, eyeing Nagini as if it were a very scaly, grammatically inept bomb around Tom's shoulders instead. "I need you to get in place," the Head Boy began once he was convinced that Harry wasn't about to flee, "at the center of the first group."

Since he was still wrestling the urge to run and concentratng on replying in English at the same time, Harry only realized what Tom had said two seconds later. "Wait, what?" Riddle wanted him to join the formation? "But I work better alone, as a dueler!"

"I realize that," Tom said, he and the cockatrice now at a disturbingly close distance that meant that no one else could hear their conversation. "I feel the same way about myself. However, with the testudo, duelists are needless. Everyone will be protected. We just need powerful wizards to cast powerful shields." Harry wondered if

Tom realized that he'd just paid him a backwards compliment, but figured if he did, it was probably purposeful and supposed to pacify him.

Fighting in a formation? It went against all his instincts. Harry favored maneuverability. The testudo meant that they'd be progressing in a slow march, letting lethal spells hit them, through the castle until they got to Myrtle's bathroom. Harry admitted it: he liked to charge in and blast. The saying 'the best defense is a strong offense'? That was one of his maxims.

Tom waited expectantly. Harry had no doubt he knew he'd crumble. Nagini was leaning so far over Tom's shoulder that it was practically doubt to flop over and smack into his chest. Tom rescued the squirming cockatrice. "Say," he instructed.

Nagini had other plans. "Mommy!"

Not good! Harry barely managed to squash the panic from exploding all over his face when it lunged forward and hurdled into his arms. He let out a yelp as he tasted a mouthful of ecstatic cockatrice.

"Mommy! Here Mommy is!"

Don't look at it while you speak, don't look at it while you speak-!

Tom was too stunned to do anything but stare as his cockatrice abandoned all the decorum he had been attempting to teach it and glommed Harry's face. Harry stumbled back, trying to grab Nagini's waist and haul it off him. The very species confused cockatrice, which appeared to be convinced that it was part cat, leapt up on top of Harry's face with the help of its overly large wings and nuzzled its face in his hair.

Harry now looked like he was wearing a bush on his head instead. "Argh! Riddle, get your pet's ugly mug off me!" For some bizarre reason, he looked like he was concentrating on solving Einstein's equations for the Theory of Relativity.

The distressed and mortified yell jerked Tom out of his stupor. "Evander, did she just call you 'Mommy'?"

"Well it's obviously confused! And since when did you become such an expert on its gender?" One of the wings slapped Harry in the face. "Ow!" He swallowed the 'watch where you put that thing' that had almost come out of his mouth, which would have surely been in Parseltongue. "Riddle!"

"Nagini, stop." Tom's eyes narrowed. Potter hadn't given the expected reaction, which was to declare that he had no idea what Nagini had called him since he supposedly wasn't a parselmouth.

The cockatrice had stopped stepping all over Harry's head to get a better seat. Harry didn't bother restraining a glare as she shuffled one more time, letting her tail drape down his back and wings hang on either side of his face.

The Slytherins burst out laughing. "Nice Egyptian headdress, Evander!"

Tom couldn't help but smile himself despite the situation. Harry whirled around and retorted with sarcasm a la carte, "Thanks a lot!" Nagini nestled herself into Harry's hair, arched its neck and leaned down until its head was hovering above Harry's nose.

Tom grinned as the former Gryffindor went cross-eyed. "Watch out, Evander. I think she likes-"

Nagini gave Harry's nose a long, sloppy lick. "Ugh!" Harry cried. "Holy crap! What was that for?!"

The laughter died.

Harry froze after he had realized what had just happened.

Then Nagini repeated quizzically, "Holy crap?"

Tom was torn between cursing Harry for teaching his cockatrice foul language and cursing him for keeping the fact that he was a parselmouth a secret.

"I can explain," Harry announced while wiping the saliva off his nose. It was giving him an itch, probably a hint of the poison that it would grow into. "Really, I can-"

"Evander," Tom gritted his teeth to keep his temper in check, "when exactly were you planning to tell me about this?"

"When it became important! Like now!"

"Why on earth wouldn't that – that ability be important?"

"Oh come on! What was I going to say? 'Good morning Tom, did you sleep well? By the way, I can speak to snakes'?"

"Holy crap!" Nagini chirped.

Harry winced. Tom growled, proving it was possible in the snake language, "Don't use that appalling language, Nagini! Potter, I will not have you teaching my cockatrice swear words!"

"Technically it's not a swear word," Harry said before he could stop himself.

"Regardless, you will – no, we aren't having this conversation now. Do you have any idea how I could have used this information?" What if they engaged Hadrian in battle and he pulled that as one of his wild cards? He might have an entire army of serpentine troops training in his headquarters! Granted, with the whole 'snakes are evil and Tom by extension' stereotype Lee Jordon, the Dark Lord's unofficial publicist, perpetrated, not to mention how he played up the Godric Gryffindor and Salazar Slytherin split, it seemed unlikely, but the possibility was there. The Order had to be prepared for all eventualities – Hadrian was a loose cannon! Tom wouldn't put a stunt like that past him.

“Can’t we save the lecture for later?” Harry interjected before he earned another round of verbal flaying. “Yeah, I’m a parselmouth. Yeah, I’ve been keeping it a secret. But that doesn’t change the fact that I know a hiding place!”

As Harry finished and Tom seethed, both became intensely aware of the fact that they were chewing each other out in front of all of Slytherin house in the incredibly still-standing testudo formation. “Get into formation, Evander. Nagini - come.” Coolly, he marched up and lifted the cockatrice from Harry’s shoulders.

“Tom-”

“Get into formation, Evander.” He loathed the fact that this sudden revelation felt like both a literal and figurative stab in the back. “The leading group,” he snapped, avoiding Potter’s gaze.

Somehow the brash, unpredictable, and potentially dangerous boy had grown on him. Tom hadn’t kept his parselmouth ability secret. He hadn’t known how serious the stigma surrounding it was and figured that even if it was, his supposed savior status would spare him. The skill had been exposed in his first year during herbology. Since then he had been cast in suspicion both in Hogwarts and in the Wizarding world, and it had increased exponentially when Hadrian had returned. The Dark Lord wasn’t exactly unpopular, and the Wizarding world lapped up drama by the barrel full.

He’d never had the chance to meet his mother’s side of the family, the side that would have been parselmouths as well, but he’d always seen it as a link to them, a link to his magical relatives. Logically, he knew the Gaunts wouldn’t have given him the home he wanted, but still, the idea of someone else being a parselmouth...Tom supposed he’d subconsciously molded it into a symbol of companionship and understanding.

He could have all the friends he wanted – he certainly attracted them – but none of them could understand the burden that came with being him. With being the Boy Who Lived and his permanently mutilated life because of it. Another parselmouth...that was closer than Tom would

have hoped. Genetics aside, at least they would partially understand the spite he had to endure.

He almost laughed. It was just another of life's hateful ironies that the closest being to family he had was apparently Hadrian. A fresh wave of self-loathing swept through him. Oh, yes, this unexpected turn of events happened to hit one of his weaknesses – that irrational desire for a companion, which was completely unfounded given his own family members, the supposedly closest companions, yet refused to go away no matter how well he thought he had buried it – but nevertheless. He didn't care if Harry intended it or not. He must be a complete fool to have let him take advantage of it.

Look at yourself now. Here he was, feeling betrayed of all things, that Harry Potter hadn't told him that he was a parselmouth.

"Idiot," Tom muttered. I can't believe it. Did you become attached to Potter on some level? Did you think that it was acceptable, or something equally absurd? Idiot. "Evander," he ordered as he squeezed his way beside Harry. "Lead us forward."

"...Right," Harry answered from Tom's side. He had no doubt that both he and Tom were going to realize that being upset about this didn't make much sense, but he could understand Tom's reaction. It was probably like...like Neville revealing that he was actually Harry's long lost cousin and that he'd decided not to tell him because it never came up in conversation.

He hadn't really thought Tom would be that angry about it though. A large part of him had visualized the reaction as a pause, then a raised eyebrow, and then an "oh". With Tom's calm manner, the second scene he'd come up with involved Tom just giving him a curious look and wondering to himself how best to use the new information to further the resistance against the Dark Lord.

Harry guessed it was a testament to Tom's ability to create as many facades and demeanors he liked as it suited him. And things were starting to look up, too, Harry inwardly sighed to himself. He wasn't going to deny that he was feeling guilty about it, but the idea of telling people he was a parselmouth was frightening. The stigma was

annoying, of course, but it was more like if he told Tom, it would seem like he was looking for an acknowledgement of...something. He wasn't sure what exactly it was.

Plus, that meant he would have to acknowledge another similarity to Voldemort, something he had been trying to deny ever since Ron had told him about Slytherin on the train ride to Hogwarts. The idea of being like Voldemort, like 'he' was in this realm, was horrifying.

Not a very smart choice, now that he thought of it. Burying your head in the sand didn't make the problem go away, but it was comforting. Stupid, but comforting.

Harry took a breath and a step, the motion nudging everyone else in line, who had their arms linked, forward. The porthole was small enough that they had to squish together, but since the formation was mainly long instead of wide, it wasn't like ribs were creaking.

The moment the first line stepped out, Tom ordered, "Shields!"

Harry shot one up, the students around him and in the last formations following one by one. He grimaced when he heard the telltale repeating of someone who couldn't get the spell right, but continued to move them forward. 'Andy' was left inside.

Nagini's long neck swayed back and forth as she licked the air. "May I open eyes now?"

"Not yet."

Harry noticed with some trepidation that Tom hadn't put up a shield. He started to ask but stopped when he noticed Tom's eyes narrowing at the motion despite the fact that his gaze was kept ahead. Alright then. He obviously isn't going to talk to me now, but I can still expand this shield. Tom twitched, but otherwise didn't object. What's he thinking?

With their footsteps practically falling all at the same time, the Slytherins sounded like storm troopers. A ripple of nervousness past

through the crowd as they heard a cacophony of spells ricocheting nearby.

Harry glanced down at the Maurader's Map in his hands. "Five unknown dots. Probably Death Eaters." He watched the huge blob that was their formation inch towards the five rapidly darting dots ahead and once again had to leash the urge to cancel his shield, jump out of the restraining linked arms, and fight.

"Confringo!"

"Ferio!"

The students were shifting again. Tom spoke up, "Keep up your shields. Whatever you do, you must not cast any offensive spells or you'll break the formation. I will be the only one shooting spells." Harry tried not to scowl. "Front line, do not look at me. If you do, you will also break the formation." Like clockwork, everyone in the front line looked at Tom before realizing what he said and looking away. Not that Tom hadn't expected that though.

Black cloaked and gold masked figures appeared in the crossroads nearby. "Nagini," Tom said. "Open your eyes and look at the golden faces."

Harry immediately looked away, his heart giving a wild thump. Was he going to kill the Death Eaters? Merlin..!

One of them noticed the group and turned to fire off a spell. "Stupe – argh!" he broke off, clutching his head and swearing. Harry didn't dare move his eyes from anything but the space in front of him, but as the Death Eater stumbled and Tom easily shot a Stunner at him, he realized that Nagini's gaze wasn't strong enough to kill, but it must be strong enough to give one heck of a migraine.

"Stupefy," Tom picked off another Death Eater and cast a spell at another one, which immediately forced him to look at Tom to see where the attack was coming from. Nagini's gaze did its job, and the Death Eater was probably begging for a Headache Potion right about then.



So far so good, Tom thought. Not even one spell had hit their shields...yet.

Seeing success, the students relaxed, and anyone who considered bolting decided to reinforce their shields instead.

The next hall had Death Eaters galore, meaning that the sixth and seventh years were infinitely glad that they didn't have shoddy shields. Nagini once again put the Death Eaters, who Tom could tell were all experienced duelers, out of commission. As he looked around though, he had to wonder where exactly Potter was taking them. This looked like the second floor and the direction they were heading would bring them to a girls' bathroom.

"Close your eyes," Tom told his cockatrice. Harry was slowing them all to a stop, and he couldn't be more dubious. The Chamber of Secrets, the mythical lair of my ancestor, is in a girls' bathroom? That's absurd!

Harry slipped his arms out and pried himself away, reaching the door with a few graceful, flowing steps. It was Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, or at least it would be if Myrtle had ever died there. Unlike in his world, water didn't ooze out from the door. In fact, Harry decided as he opened the door, the place was actually rather nice. Polished slabs of white tiles carpeted the floor and walls. The water taps were tinted with golden varnish.

"Evander," Tom stated.

"I know what I'm doing, don't worry," Harry assured. "And no one make lewd jokes about this."

Someone whispered, "Are we seriously hiding in a girls' bathroom?"

"No," Harry answered, earning some questioning looks. Guessing that a majority of them didn't know what he was replying to, Harry elaborated, "Just wait a moment. This isn't what it seems." He walked inside and scanned the taps until he spotted the familiar snake carving skulking on the broken sink. "Lumos," he whispered, the soft

light spilling onto the floor. He caught Tom's eye and motioned him forward.

Tom moved into the bathroom, Nagini curling her claws into his school uniform as he did so. "The great Salazar Slytherin hides his fortress within a girls' bathroom. It's so ridiculous, it's almost cunning."

Harry suspected that Tom was subtly insulting him, but instead of being offended, his desire to prove that he was telling the truth multiplied. "Watch." He pointed his wand at the sink, letting the spell give the carving the illusion of life. "Open."

The ghostly hiss permeated the bathroom. Suddenly stones grinded and shifted; Harry turned and Tom's eyes widened as the Chamber of secrets revealed itself. The dank tunnel appeared in all its monstrous glory, open and waiting.

Tom took an astounded step back, somehow still managing to appear dignified as he gaped. "It's true," he breathed. "You were telling the truth...the Chamber of Secrets..."

Harry didn't feel like he should interrupt and just watched the astonishment and realization flitting over Tom's face. Nagini flicked her tongue again. "Smell another," she quipped.

Tom broke out of his staring at the comment and gave Harry a silent inquiry, not trusting his ability to be articulate at the moment. Harry explained, "You're going to have to be careful when you're down there. There's a twenty foot or so basilisk down there-"

"Excuse me?"

Harry didn't like the fact that Tom's expression had gone from wondering to downright dangerous in less than a heartbeat. "Er, well, there's a basilisk down there...I mean, I guess it's probably sleeping or something since no one woke it up yet...but you know, you should probably be careful just in case-"

“Potter,” Tom advanced on him, “do you mean to tell me that you brought one quarter of the school here under the pretense of providing a hiding place, and forgot to mention the fact that there’s a twenty foot basilisk down there?!”

“Well when you put it like that it sounds-”

“How did this ever qualify as safe in your mind?!”

“Hey, no one can get in if they’re not a parselmouth! Besides, you can control it – it’s supposed to obey the Heir of Slytherin and last time I checked, you qualify!”

Tom raked a hand through his auburn curls, imploring the heavens in exasperation, “Why me?”

Harry decided to ignore his mutterings about ‘reckless Gryffindors’ and ‘daredevils’ – come on, it was going to be fine! – and instead said, “Whenever you get to a door, just say ‘open’ again and you should get where you need to go. Last time I was there, the basilisk only came out after Volde...after it was released from behind Slytherin’s statue, so it shouldn’t be able to come out unless you let it.”

Tom halted suddenly at the words ‘last time’ and slowly swiveled to Harry. “You’re crackpot theory...no one knows about this...you couldn’t possibly have known about the Chamber in any other way...you really – you’re actually..?”

A lopsided grin flourished on Harry’s lips. “I did say I would tell you ‘I told you so’.”

Tom watched him for a moment. “So in your...universe...you bear the scar?”

Harry lifted up his bangs and the pale, jagged lightning bolt flashed from the center of his forehead. “It’s not fake. I know you thought it was when you saw it the first time.”

“...Have the rest of them come in.” Harry nodded and started back to the Slytherins, thankful that Tom finally believed him and that he

wasn't Harebrained Harry anymore. Why hadn't he thought about showing the Chamber before? He knew for a fact that no one but Slytherin himself knew about it in this universe! It would have been so easy...

As Harry disappeared out the door, Tom took a step forward and peered down the tunnel. Slime coated every inch of the place. He wrinkled his nose at the smell and decided to test out a theory. "Stairs." Immediately, the tunnel shifted again, and a steep stairwell pushed out from the passageway's wall. That's better.

A flood of the first formation poured inside, Harry leading them. He stopped when he saw the stairs. "Wait, you mean that there was a better way to get down there this whole time?"

"Are you honestly telling me that you didn't even try to ask for stairs? You just jumped down?" Harry's face said it all. Tom only shook his head. Addressing everyone else, he said, "Start going down one by one. Don't move from the room you arrive in." The students eyed the tunnel suspiciously but quickly obeyed.

As Harry ushered in more people, Tom found himself standing back. It was incredible to think about, that Harry had come from an alternate universe where he was the Boy Who Lived. He had his own Dark Lord to face...

Salazar, am I the Dark Lord in his world? The thought was frightening. He had never been strictly 'Light'. The Dark Arts had always fascinated him. After Hadrian had stolen the Philosopher's Stone, the realization that the most powerful Dark Lord in British history was planning to hunt him down like a dog and kill him had steamrolled all his illusions of childhood.

How was he supposed to win against someone like that? With Levitation Charms and Stunners? He needed firepower. The Dark Arts were firepower.

It was the Triwizard tournament that had made him realize that he might become as bad as Hadrian if he kept going the way he was. He confessed: he panicked. His greatest fear was death, and seeing

Hadrian face to face made him unbearably aware of the fact that he might actually die.

Dark curses were labeled so because generally nothing good could come out of them. The Imperius Curse, for example, was considered Dark because, generally, it was inexcusable to crush and want to crush someone's free will, though it could be argued that it was used for good, like saving someone from committing suicide.

Other curses, though, didn't have that grey. The Cruciatus was truly Dark because the motivation for it had to be for sadistic pleasure. It wouldn't work properly if the motive was righteous anger. In fact, it wouldn't work well if it was anger, period; it would fizzle out.

The Killing Curse was similar; the caster had to want the victim dead, generally out of hatred or something similar. It didn't work for euthanasia, for example.

Dark spells were sentenced harshly for a reason. In court, motive was always taken into account. If a Dark spell was cast successfully, it was proof that the intention was to inflict self-satisfying harm for the purpose of self-satisfaction.

When Tom attempted to kill Hadrian with Avada Kedavra, he'd become aware of the delicate line he walked. For the most part, he believed the ends justified the means, but the means didn't include becoming into a coldblooded murder. Unforgivables were where he drew the line for certain; in regards to other Dark spells, he tried to make certain that his motive was merely efficiency. The possibility that it had actually crossed it in much a significant manner somewhere...

"I think we've got one more group to go." Harry's voice yanked him from his thoughts. Green eyes looked at him, and Tom couldn't help but shiver as he recalled unnaturally golden, gleaming ones smirking at him from an almost identical face. "You alright?"

"Yes." Tom straightened. "Yes. I'm fine."

Harry wasn't convinced, but he let it slide. "You might want to go down there. They'll probably be worried. I'll help everyone else go."

Agreeing, Tom hesitated.

"Something wrong?"

"No, just...thank you."

Harry shrugged. "I knew a place and we needed one. It's no big deal."

"I didn't mean solely for the Chamber. I meant that because I didn't believe you..." he trailed off uncomfortably.

"Forget about it," Harry spared him. The threat of an impending apology was bringing a simmer to his cheeks. They always made him feel a bit awkward. "I would have done the same if I were you. How were you supposed to know, anyway?"

"Nevertheless, thank you for putting up with it." He added dryly, "I know you aren't the most patient person."

Harry merely rolled his eyes. "Just go. I'll take care of the others."

"Mommy..." Nagini whined.

"You'll see me later, don't worry."

Reluctantly, the cockatrice kept from leaping at him, settling for drooping her head on Tom's shoulder. Offering Harry a small smile, Tom disappeared from the room and Harry brought the remaining few students to the tunnel.

He was just about to climb in and seal the passageway when he remembered: Bellatrix and Lucius weren't here. "Merlin!"

Where were they? Oh yes; the horcrux said that they were in the Room of Requirement. My horcrux, Harry shuddered. Well, he didn't have time to contemplate the horrors of how his shredded soul was

floating around Hogwarts in the body of a map. No one else knew where they were.

You know what this means, don't you? A voice in the back of Harry's head sang. Harry sighed. Stupid hero complex. The halls were small enclosed spaces. That meant less room to move, which was his specialty, but it also meant that if he got close enough to his opponents, he'd be able to disarm them quickly with hand-to-hand combat.

"Close." He took a breath. Here we go again...Harry sprinted out of the bathroom, his wand out. If he wanted to get to the seventh floor, he was going to have to go back several hallways. Hoping he'd make good time, he headed towards his destination.

Noise around the corner. Listening, he estimated two. Harry rounded it and shot off a Disarming spell but missed. The two Death Eaters returned the favor and Harry deflected and whirled through them to the other side of the hall. He flicked his wand and the suit of armor standing on the left flew at them.

The flying parts were batted away. These Death Eaters weren't exactly low grade. The pair worked well together; while one of them shot off offensive spells, the other did defensive for the two of them. Harry's eyes narrowed. Were the Death Eaters trained together? Both this and the way they fought in Hogsmeade seemed to suggest that they were.

Harry had the crazy idea to blast the ceiling above them before he mentally slapped himself for even thinking about it.

Wait, is there something else on the ceiling I can use? Glancing up, he spotted a small chandelier, but it wasn't big enough to incapacitate them.

"Diffinido!"

"Incarcerous!"

"Protego."

"I don't have time for this," Harry muttered. An idea coming to him, he jabbed his wand at the floor in front of them. Glacies. Ice streaked over the hallway Harry was backing out of. Just to up the slipperiness factor, he sent a torrent of water at the ice. Death Eater number one slipped and Harry shot a minor string of electricity at the frozen water, eliciting a yelp from the Death Eaters and causing the other to lose his footing.

When Harry's follow up spell hit a shield though, Harry knew if he lingered, he'd be fighting for a long time. Sending another round of water at them, he jumped into the hall right next to the one he was currently in and cast a Disillusionment Charm on himself. Maybe it wouldn't hide the sound of his footsteps, but either way, they'd be hard pressed to find him. He was a fast runner.

Harry raced past another pair of Death Eaters, who frowned before dismissing it as a school ghost. Most students couldn't cast Disillusionment Charms, after all. It was above NEWT level.

Harry flew up a flight of stairs, a little amazed that he wasn't panting yet. There hadn't exactly been a Hogwarts cross-country or track team, but he figured if there was, the runners would find his pace grueling.

Slughorn and Vector were demolishing a team of admittedly skilled Death Eaters to his right. Harry had to remind himself not to join in again and continued up the next set of stairs.

Finally, he reached the seventh floor. Cautiously, Harry cancelled the invisibility on himself when he heard no one around and jogged towards the famous Room. As he neared it, he noticed that the horcrux was right. Someone was occupying it.

Checking again, Harry didn't hear anyone nearby. It seemed that the Death Eaters' 'storage room' wasn't very official, given the fact that there were no guards. Or are they inside? Angling himself to the side, Harry opened the door.

"Immobilus!"



Great, Harry thought sarcastically, throwing up a shield and throwing himself into the Room. He was forced to roll out of the way of the next hex. At once he was on his feet and had to spin to avoid the next one. "Protego!" he yelled. Did these Death Eaters have to make this place so small? He looked up and was briefly surprised. "Jasmine? Hugo?" A quick scan of the place, which was fashioned into a lounge room, told him that Teddy and Rose were also there. Bellatrix's unmoving form was in the corner, and Lucius stared back at him beside her without even twitching. Immobilized, Harry concurred.

"Evander?" Jasmine seemed puzzled. "What are you doing here? Where's the Map?"

"The Map...You know what it is?"

"Yes. Didn't he bring you here?"

They helped the Death Eaters break into Hogwarts and they're the ones holding Lucius and Bellatrix. Wonderful - Tom wasn't exaggerating when he said Gryffindor breeds Death Eaters. "No." Harry lied, "I must have missed him."

"Then how did you know what the Map is if you didn't meet him?" Teddy asked. "You wouldn't have known unless he had told you."

Harry froze. He didn't have an answer for that one. "Look," he opted for instead, "let them go. They haven't done anything. They're just bystanders."

"They know about the Map," Rose countered. "They overheard us in the hallway. We can't let them go."

"And what are you going to do with them? Throw them in a dungeon? Toss around a few Memory Charms? Torture them?"

"We'll do whatever our Lord wishes of us," Jasmine told him. "Besides, the two of them will make excellent prizes. Plenty of our number has a bone to pick with the Blacks and Malfoys."

On hearing that, Harry started to walk towards them, already planning the next spell he was going to use. If I get close enough, I can end this without a single spell. If I'm fast enough. It was a risk; he'd never got the chance to really test out just how quick he could be. If he was too slow, he'd have to hope that he could summon enough of his magic to counteract any binding spell, assuming they didn't use a Stunner, they put on him. In other words, wandless magic.

"So," he said, "you're doing this for revenge. I thought that Gryffindors are supposed to noble."

Her eyes flashed. "You are a Gryffindor as well."

"Guess I'm not the same type of Gryffindor you are." He whipped out his wand. "Nox!" Blackness enveloped the room. Harry tore ahead and took advantage of the confusion to Summon their wands, but he only heard one clatter on the floor before Teddy yelled, "lumos!"

"Stupefy!"

"Protego," Harry ground out, worried that he'd overestimated his skills. The four of them had spread out and were constantly moving, thereby reducing the possibility of being hit. It seemed that they had been trained as well. Harry hurled a pillow off one of the sofas and swiftly transfigured it into the first heavy thing he could think of, which happened to be a bowling ball. Sadly, it missed.

"Petrificus Totalis!"

Assessing the situation, Harry noticed that they were probably trying to put his back to the wall and kill his maneuvering ability. Harry was annoyed to notice that he was closer to it than he would have liked. He needed to break out of the circle they were forming around him before they managed to hit him with spells on all four sides. He doubted he would be able to dodge every single one if that happened.

Pitching a glance back at the wall, he decided to run up and kick off to the side to give himself from speed. Would it work? Maybe. He's seen Muggle children do it at least partially well, so he should do at least a bit better. Summoning all his strength and agility, Harry ran at

the wall and tried to fit as many steps as he could on before he pushed off to the side.

He wasn't sure who was surprised more at the level of his success: him or the four people dueling him. It worked well enough that his next rush to Hugo was fast enough to make him step back in surprise. Grinning, Harry dropped to the floor, sweeping Hugo's feet from beneath him and then used the momentum to swing back onto his own feet. "Stupefy," he called and used a Levitation Charm to throw him onto one of the sofas.

Feeling a new confidence now that he wasn't cornered, Harry pushed off the arm of the nearest sofa, launching himself in the air. He threw his shield forward, causing it to bash into the incoming spells like a tidal wave. Said spells bounced back to their owners and, because they were returned at a closer range, made dodging all that much harder.

Rose dropped, felled by her own Stunner. Harry felt his boots hit the edge of the coach and rapidly jumped off as it crashed onto the floor. Unfortunately, he wasn't quick enough.

Harry stumbled. Teddy fired a jinx at him, and Harry just barely managed to save himself from getting hit by tucking his knees and head into his chest and attempting a desperate roll.

He honestly hadn't expected it to work. He'd been bracing himself for some pain; he figured he'd done it too late and he'd land flat on his back or pulverize his shoulder. But lo and behold, he landed on his feet.

A summersault? He was so impressed that the books Teddy hurled at him smacked Harry on the back of the head. "Ow!" Harry scowled, berating himself for getting distracted at a time like this. Come on, Harry, a lot of people who take gymnastics can do that – try to stay awake! He Banished a couple and dodged another barrage before sweeping them up with his wand and sending them back at Teddy as a swarm of canaries.

“That trick I learned from Hermione,” Harry smirked as the birds started dive-bombing the metamorphagus’ face.

“Teddy!” Jasmine cried, torn between defeating Harry and protecting her boyfriend.

“Argh!” Teddy dropped his wand and threw his arms up to protect his face. Jasmine instantly forgot about Harry and bellowed a whirlwind of “finite incantum”s, as she hurried over to his side. Harry felt a little bit guilty about Stunning them both at the moment, but he’d felt the same way when he’d faced Draco Malfoy in the dueling club. That had cost him. He wasn’t going to let it do the same here.

“Stupefy,” he chuckled one at Jasmine, who fell to the floor midstride. “Stupefy.” Harry did the same for Teddy and dispersed the attacking canaries. The tiny scratches on his face could be cleared up with a simple visit to Madam Pomfery.

With that thought comforting him, he strode over to a shocked Bellatrix and an unreadable Lucius. “Finite incantum,” Harry waved his wand. The immobilizing spells died and their bodies relaxed from the straight-as-a-board condition they had been in previously.

“Evander-”

“You are a campeador,” Lucius deadpanned.

Harry blinked. “A what?”

This time even Lucius looked surprised. “You don’t,” Bellatrix was disbelieving, “know what a campeador is?”

“Um, should I?”

“Of course you should! How could you not know? Tom said you were sheltered, but even that doesn’t mean-”

“Have the Spanish not heard of our Dark Lord, Evander?” Lucius stood gracefully.

Harry knew he was in trouble. "Can we talk about this later? I've got to get you to safety. We're hiding out in the...well, it's complicated. Basically, the second floor girls' bathroom. Tom and the rest of the Slytherins are there. We don't want to be here if someone comes inside." The indecipherable expression on the blonde's face unnerved him. But it made sense: this Campeador thing, which was probably something to do with his strength and speed, would be something that he and Evil Harry would have in common. Harry silently groaned to himself. Does this have a reputation as bad as Parseltongue? Merlin, I hope not. He probably thinks I'm related to the Dark Lord...if only he knew how right he was.

Bellatrix looked between them and decided to end the stalemate. "Lead on, Evander. And thank you," she gestured to the fallen quartet. Unlike Lucius, he was going to be a bit more open minded about this. She'd seen what stigmas did to Tom, and she wasn't going to perpetrate any if she could help it.

Harry levitated the four onto the sofas, which earned a disgusted look from Lucius, before crossing the room to the door. "Have your wands ready," he told them, twisting into a dueling stance.

"Obviously," Lucius responded coolly. Harry frowned but otherwise didn't say anything. He noticed that Lucius refused to look at him, not out of fear, but out of anger. With regret, he remembered the unwittingly insensitive things he'd said about the article about Ron's escape from Azkaban and it dawned on him that Lucius probably suspected Harry of having a hand in his parents' kidnapping.

I just can't get a break, can I? "Wait a second." He tilted his head to the side and strained his ears, listening. At the corner of his eye, he noticed that Lucius' gaze had gone even colder and Bellatrix was watching him with mingled curiosity and unease. Harry wasn't certain where exactly, but he could hear footsteps a while away. The 'while away' part was the good news. The bad news was that they might need to get past there to make it to the stairs.

"I think there are some people there," he whispered to them.

"You 'think'?" Bellatrix questioned.

"I'm sure. But I'm whether we need to get past them, I don't know. I have to get closer to gage their location." Taking care to walk as quietly as possible, they walked towards the stairs and closer to the Death Eaters when Harry paused.

"What is it?"

He murmured, "A few of them are heading in a different direction." He'd have to keep an ear out for them. "Never mind. Let's go..." The Death Eaters were ahead. Harry stopped around the corner, debating when to poke his head out and see both where they were and where they were looking. Bellatrix conjured a mirror and held it to him. "What's this for?"

"Use it to look around the hall," she explained.

"Oh. Thanks." Harry tilted the mirror to the side, trying to catch a view of the figures in the hall. "Drat." At her look, he said, "There has to be at least ten of them. I know we're all good duelists, but we're not going to be able to take down ten experienced fighters in a cramped hallway."

Lucius, still not meeting Harry's eyes, suggested impassively, "Cause that portrait over there to fall. The noise should distract them."

"I don't know if it will distract them long enough though. And again, they seem pretty well trained. They'll probably remember to turn back pretty quickly." Thinking hard, Harry came to an idea. "What if...we could crash that portrait and levitate each other to the other side. They might not notice us if we keep close to the ceiling."

"That is ridiculous Evander."

Harry glared at him. "Alright then. You come up with something. I..." He paused. "There's a group coming around the other side."

Bellatrix's eyes widened. "As in, down the other side of the hall?"

"Yep."

“As in, we’ll get sandwiched between a bunch of Death Eater fireteams? (2)”

“Well, if we’re looking at this optimistically, I’d say...yeah.”

Lucius elected, “Disillusionment Charms.”

“Can you all cast one?”

“I can,” Bellatrix replied. “Fairly enough.”

Harry looked at Lucius, who only said, “Sporadically.” Bellatrix waved her wand over him and Harry saw him flinch at the icy feeling of the spell before he vanished. She cast one on herself and Harry put up one of his own.

“Stay still and they might not hear us when they come closer.”

“How long do you think that will be?” Bellatrix whispered. “This spell takes a lot of energy to maintain.” Harry was wondering about that as well. Disillusionment Charms were great, but you couldn’t hold them up for long or you’d lose any decent casting ability you had. It was the reason so few people bothered using them in battle.

Harry heard the Death Eaters behind them entering the hall rather quietly. “Why do I get the feeling,” he mumbled under his breath, “that this was somehow planned?” Abruptly the approaching footsteps halted. The suddenness sent a lash of fear squirming in Harry’s stomach. Beside him, he heard Lucius and Bellatrix take an involuntary breath.

Then he chided himself, Don’t be stupid, Potter. It’s just a coincidence that they stopped just after you spoke.

Lucius and Bella, who had used the same argument before and had paid for it, didn’t let it fool them. They ran to Harry’s next conclusion a second before he did.

People don't hear that well. I mean, you'd have to be a...blast. Dread writhing in him, Harry slowly turned around.

Golden eyes stared right at him. Lucius took a sharp step back, and the small, devilish grin on the man's face grew at the sound. A paralyzed Harry would only gawk.

He was taller than Harry was, his shoulders slightly broader. Despite his silky ebony robes, Harry could tell that his body was leaner and more muscular. The messy hair all Potter men seemed to have been plagued with didn't have the ruffled appearance of a Quidditch player after a game. Instead, with the body of a man in his early or mid twenties, it gave him a roguishly handsome, rebellious appearance.

He looked exactly like Harry.

"I can hear all three of you," he spoke, his deeper voice tinted with amusement. "Don't waste your time or mine. I knew you had escaped the Room of Requirement since you left."

This time Harry was the one taking a step back. He barely registered the fact that he was trembling or what he was doing until he backed into Lucius.

Lucius shoved him. "What the Hell," he snarled, "are you?"

All pretense of invisibility was gone. Bellatrix ended the spells she cast, and the two Slytherins reappeared. "Run!"

Harry snapped out of it. "Defodio!" he bellowed, blasting the floor in front of the nearest Death Eaters. He didn't care that the Dark Lord lazily batted away the flying tiles; he grabbed Lucius' and Bellatrix's arms and dashed down the hall they had been too worried about being seen going for to go through. It didn't matter now; they knew they were there.

Deadly spells catapulted in their direction. Harry bit down a gasp as a Cutting Curse grazed his shoulder. Blood spurted from the wound and Harry killed his Disillusionment Charm, opting for increased



magical reserves instead. "Keep running!" he thrust them in front of him just as an enormous bolt of pure, raw magic roared towards them.

Bollocks! The paintings from the hallway were screaming as it charred their frames and hurdled towards Harry. Harry planted his feet on the ground and unleashed the most powerful shield he could muster. Magic detonated in top of it.

Sweat speckled his forehead as he struggled to keep it steady. He clamped his teeth together. He wasn't going to let all three of them get deep fried if he could stop it!

The explosion of magic ended and Harry almost staggered forward in relief. He straightened and immediately tensed again as he met the Dark Lord's mildly surprised and curious gaze. "My, my. Ron was right; you really do look like my clone. But why are you helping them escape, Harry?" At the sound of his name from his counterpart's mouth, Harry took a hitched lungful of air.

"Evander!" Bellatrix yelled. She shot off a Cutting Curse at the Dark Lord, who once again carelessly swatted it away. "This isn't time for small talk!"

Taking her advice, Harry ignored the subsequent damage he was about to do to Hogwarts and blasted the ceiling above the Death Eaters. He didn't turn to see the results, but from the calm steps following him, he knew he hadn't done any real damage.

Within seconds he'd caught up with Bellatrix and Lucius.

"Evander," Lucius hissed at him, "why exactly did he call you 'Harry'?"

From the way his eyes seared, Harry knew that the Malfoy heir knew the relation the Dark Lord had to the name.

"Questions later-"

"No, I think we'll have our interrogation now. It cannot possibly be a coincidence that you resemble him precisely!"

"I don't-"

"Was all this your fault?" he demanded. "Were you a Death Eater all this time, worming your insidious way into-"

"I'm not a Death Eater!"

"Oh yes, forgive me," Lucius sneered, "you are more. You couldn't possibly be his son – the likeness is too great. What are you?"

"Lucius, shut up!" Bellatrix screamed. Both boys were temporarily stunned into silence. "I don't care if he's the Dark Lord himself – we ought to be concentrating on surviving, not tearing each other to shreds!"

"Why not?" Lucius countered through a ragged breath. They were going at breakneck speed with no rest, and Bella and Lucius felt the strain. "He's probably following us to see where we hide! We're better off-"

"I just offered you a hiding place!" Harry shouted.

Stairs!

He pointed ahead, the godsend cutting off their argument. They darted onto the first step –

- and stopped. Death Eaters were climbing the bottom one, their wands already pointing at the trio. Ten in the back, five on the sides, and five on the stairs. Harry's head shot up to survey their surroundings. If they ran to the only open route they had, which was on the right, they'd just be running in circles until they were caught.

Bellatrix realized this too. "It's down the stairs or surrender."

"We are not surrendering," Harry and Lucius announced simultaneously.

Time for a suddenly very realistic cliché. "Both of you," Harry cursed his hero complex with all this might, "go ahead. I'll buy you some time."

Levitate each other off these stairs to the ones below if you have to. If the Death Eaters terminate the spells, you might drop and sprain a leg, but if you numb it, you'll still be able to walk-"

"Don't be an idiot," Bella snapped while shooting a particularly nasty spell behind them. "You can't win against them. They'll just kill you, and how useful will that be? We don't have good chances of getting out of this whether you decide to be a human sacrifice or not!"

"Fine then. Jump and I'll follow." Harry had no intention of doing so. The chances might be small, but they were there. Somehow he doubted the Dark Lord would kill him...at least not straight away.

Bellatrix and Lucius eyed the nearest set of stairs. The stairs were constantly moving, so if they jumped, it was possible that they might miss...

"Go!"

"We can't," Bellatrix demurred. "It's just too big of a risk. What if we miss? And two people levitating each other at the same time? That maneuver is nearly impossible-"

Harry swore and started firing off curses to the Death Eaters below them. "Confringo! Glacies! Levicorpus! Flabra! Exolesco!" Two of the five Death Eaters answered with their own spells while the rest threw up shields. "Expelliarmus!" Harry was getting desperate now. There was a real likelihood that they were going to lose and he didn't want to know what losing would entail in the aftermath.

Death Eaters from all around were still advancing, and Harry, Lucius and Bellatrix, who had started joining in, were suddenly trapped on the stairs.

Morgana! Harry eyeballed the nearest set of stairs. Screw levitation, what about old fashioned, conventional jumping?

You could break a leg! It's too far. Broken legs mean no walking, let alone running!

More expletives that accurately summarized the situation flew into Harry's head. Drawing on as much of his magic as he could, he flung a wide range expelliarmus into the five Death Eaters. To his utter relief, most of them bowled over and he started running towards them, shooting Stunners and kicking away any hands grasping for them. Bellatrix and Lucius followed from the rear, Bella Summoning several wands, but a rain of spells from the formerly passive behind forced them to stop and focus on defending against them as well.

They were now fighting a losing battle on both sides. Harry ducked, punched, weaved, elbowed, and jabbed. He was rewarded with grunts of pain and a marginally wider opening to move, but it didn't matter. The stairs couldn't be more than a meter wide. Even without their wands, the Death Eaters were squashed against them and that allowed them to easily punish the three with their bare hands.

A meaty arm from behind tried to put Harry in a choke hold. He threw back his head on the Death Eater's nose and was released. "Bollocks!" This wasn't just bad any more – this was a disaster. Harry lashed out, kicking some unidentified masked figure in the stomach. "Get off of me you – agh!"

Harry, Bellatrix, and Lucius flew through the air in a giant arc and crashed on the floor. Harry scrambled to his feet, dazed. It took him a second to realize that the three of them had been Summoned, of all things, back to the seventh floor.

Bloody Hell! He kept his wand up and positioned himself in front of the Slytherins, though it didn't make much of a difference since they were surrounded.

Ice crept down his back as he shot a look around. There was no way to get out now.

Harry glared defiantly at all of them. "Get out of the way or you'll regret it." The Death Eaters didn't respond. "Fine. Have it your way-" he slashed down his wand, only to find that someone had seized his arm. Without thinking, Harry followed up with a punch, only for his captor to block it with his forearm. His front snap kick was caught;

Harry had a moment to register who it was before his caught foot was twisted and the motion spun him off his feet.

Harry collided with the ground, completely winded. Before he could recover, the Dark Lord wrenched his hand around his back and dug his knee into his spine, trapping Harry on the ground. Harry struggle, trying to ignore the pain, when he felt the cold tip of a wand pressed against his neck. "Relax." The voice was almost soothing. "There is no point in fighting except for pride. Do you want ego to be responsible for more pain, both for yourself and for the others? Why put them through that?"

Hating how right the reasoning was, Harry stilled.

The Dark Lord waited for a moment before asking calmly, "If I let you stand, will you fight?"

Harry gritted his teeth. He knew whatever answer he gave would be the truth, and he really didn't want to give the only one he could. Quietly, after a long inner resistance, he said, "No. I won't." Wordlessly, was let up. Not meeting the golden eyed man's gaze, Harry rose. Lucius and Bellatrix stood in the center of the ring the Death Eaters had formed, their wands snatched from their hands.

"How fortunate. The Malfoy heir and the middle Black daughter...I think we've found quiet a catch." The Dark Lord smiled idly.

"Hadrian," Lucius snarled, jerking as if he was fighting the urge to lunge at him.

Hadrian? Harry repeated, partially in disbelief. My dueling alias?

Hadrian arched an aristocratic eyebrow. "Crass, Malfoy. What would your parents say?"

"What have you done with them?" he demanded.

"I've merely introduced them to new accommodations. Is that so awful?" The Dark Lord laughed. "But I hardly need to entertain the pointless questions of the spoilt spawn of one of my enemies. You'll

have no need for them when you're dead." A wand identical to Harry's own aimed at the blonde's forehead.

Lucius tensed. So many things were left undone and unsaid. Narcissa...he prayed that she wouldn't mourn him for long.

But he wasn't going to die letting Hadrian know any of this. He wasn't going to give him the satisfaction. He lifted his chin higher, staring icily back at his murderer.

He isn't...? Harry's eyes widened. I'm – he's - not just..!

"And now, time to take out the trash..."

"Wait!"

Hadrian paused. Every eye snapped to Harry.

"You...you aren't actually going to kill him are you?" Hadrian's lips twitched...in the wrong direction. "I mean, he's just a teenager...you don't want to kill a teenager, right?"

"Harry," the golden-eyed man was amused, "I've killed hundreds either directly or indirectly. If I can't kill one lousy teenager, I don't deserve to be a Dark Lord."

The Death Eaters chuckled. Harry glanced from Hadrian to Lucius and Bellatrix. He couldn't just let this happen. Arguing like a Gryffindor wasn't going to work. Instead, inhaling deeply, he used the side of him he'd been pretending wasn't there and trying to keep away from ever since his Sorting.

He forced himself to relax and say casually, "I was just thinking, if you have to punish the Malfoys, why don't you make it worse for them by kidnapping their son instead? You can have his mum and dad watch, helpless, as their son is incarcerated. Surely there is no greater pain for a parent?" Hadrian tilted his head towards Harry, indicating that he was listening. Encouraged, Harry added, "Besides, the Weasleys have a feud with them, right? Ron will appreciate this...gesture."

Lucius eyed Harry warily, realizing that he was trying to save his life, but not daring to hope. Fear thrashed inside him as he watched the Dark Lord smile. "Harry, your logic is founded; however, I know that you don't believe it. You just want me to spare him."

Bellatrix shot Harry a look that quelled his impulse to deny it. Thankful for the reminder, he swallowed and consented, "You're right. I do. Malfoy might have been a bigoted, arrogant peacock when I was here," he laid it on thick, "but I don't fancy watching him die. Still, you have to admit that it would be more fun for everyone if he were alive."

No one dared to speak as the Dark wizard considered Harry's argument. Finally, he said, "Alright." Harry felt relief pour through him. Hadrian flicked a hand and two Death Eaters grabbed Lucius, restraining him. "However, the girl..."

"No!" Lucius' poker face shattered. "Bella-!"

"Why kill her?" Harry invented a justification over the outburst. "If we take Malfoy, we'll want a messenger to break the news to Riddle. Otherwise, it might take him days to realize what happened, and that wouldn't do much for entertainment." He needed more. "Besides...it would hurt him so much more if his traumatized girlfriend did it. She could recount everything to him. He'll probably beat himself up even more because the reality that he wasn't there will be even stronger." From the corner of his vision, Harry noted Bellatrix's crossbreed expression of anger at his words and gratefulness that he was trying.

Had he been convincing?

The Dark Lord examined her for a moment. "I relent. The idea is quite appealing." He Stunned her nonverbally and she collapsed on the floor. Casting one last, apologetic look at Bellatrix, Harry met Hadrian's feral eyes. The Dark Lord leaned in and whispered, "Headquarters is at Potter Manor." Confusion gripped Harry before Hadrian unstrung a necklace and pressed it in Harry's hand. Keeping his hold on it, the Dark Lord said, "Home."

The sharp tug of a portkey caught on Harry's navel, and then Hogwarts dissolved.

(1) For those of you who don't know, snakes smell through their tongues

(2) Fire teams are smaller than squads – as I understand it from Wikipedia, it's like a team/division of people within a squad

A/N: alright, I know...the whole Harry-gets-captured-by-Death-Eaters deal. Hopefully I didn't make the way he got captured too cliché though. Anyway, any of you who feel like leaving a review, I have a couple of questions you could help me with.

1. So, first off, given that 'nine days' have passed since the Hogsmeade Incident and what happened there, do you find the fact that Tom is finally starting to be genuinely nice to Harry (and where it is right now) realistic?

2. I guess following that, would you say that Tom's reaction to Harry being a parselmouth is reasonable? I hope my explanation is reasonable, but let me know if that had you raising eyebrows. What about how the Chamber proved to him that Harry was telling the truth?

3. How Tom uses Nagini in a fight – did you expect more? (Feel free to leave suggestions)

4. Tom's Dark Arts background - too Dark? Any other comments?

5. Harry's fighting skills again. It's kind of tough to balance the fact that he's supposed to be unusually fast against random brilliance. Any thoughts?

6. An in-character contrast between the characters' actions and reactions?

7. Any comments about the military tactics or others?

As always, thanks for reading!



## Chapter Twelve

Harry tried not to fall over. Really, he did. But let's face it: the Floo hated him and portkeys were hardly any better. He lurched forward, and it was only the ridiculously fast reflexes of 'himself' that kept him from pasting his face on the ground and just generally making a fool of himself in front of an entire fireteam of Death Eaters.

It seemed that when he got older, he mastered the Floo's and the portkey's wrath.

"Thanks," Harry mumbled, looking in the completely opposite direction of his counterpart.

Wow, this floor was so classy. Marble, maybe? And the shoes of Generic Death Eater Number Three – he'd never realized how interesting shoes could be.

Hadrian wasn't offended at the fact that Harry wasn't meeting his eyes when speaking to him. Had it been him in the situation Harry was in, he wouldn't know whether he was supposed to be fighting tooth and nail to escape, making it as difficult as possible for everyone in the process, or be polite. He'd be wondering whether it was dishonorable to act civilly to his captors. "You're welcome." He lifted his eyes to the woman standing in the corner, who was gazing in concern at Harry as he studied the floor much like she would study a book.

The Malfoy spawn began struggling, his long, white-blond hair slapping the faces of the Death Eaters holding him. It had probably just hit him what the seriousness of his situation was. Hadrian flicked his wand at the teen's stomach and immediately his legs collapsed beneath him as an invisible force rammed into his middle. That'll teach you for irritating my Death Eaters.

Harry's head jerked up. Malfoy heaved in air, struggling for his formerly aloof footing. Hadrian wasn't at all surprised or bothered when Harry shot Malfoy a look that clearly said, "Don't fight."

The Dark Lord glanced at the boy's captors and jerked his head to the right. "Take him to the..." he's eyes flickered to Harry for a moment, "to the Rook." Malfoy drenched him with pure loathing, which was returned with a mocking wave, and cast a wary one at Harry before he was dragged off.

A rather amusing thought occurred to the Dark Lord. There was actually a map of the two floors the Death Eaters were allowed to enter in this room, which was the reception area. Hermione, who was now approaching Harry, had suggested that they put it in for the newly inducted. Each room on the map was labeled; this room even had a helpful red dot in the center with the classic 'you are here' sign.

However, the Dark Lord and Ron had favored the idea of switching the place that should have had the name 'prison cells' with 'sewage overflow', which had ended up becoming a rather cruel inside joke within the Inner Circle. Prisoners were often referred to as 'sewage'.

Any uppity recruit or infiltrating Order member who wandered into the 'prison cells' would find themselves sinking up to their necks in a spontaneously liquefying floor. A present from Fred and George.

Besides, it worked well as a security measure for another reason. It kept anyone outside of the Inner Circle from guessing where they were located. The only way into the manor was through portkey since the place was under Fidelus; Ron, Hermione, and Horcrux were the only ones other than Hadrian who were the Secret Keepers. With a 'sewage overflow' mark, it seemed as if their headquarters was underground.

He hoped Harry wouldn't go searching. Or at least, go searching in the wrong room.

The Dark Lord knew how Harry thought. Soon, if the boy did look, he wouldn't do it for any reason but to sate his curiosity.

"I imagine you have quite a few questions, Harry."

Harry jumped, surprised, and involuntarily looked back at Hadrian.

Drat. It was too late to look away again without making it obvious how uncomfortable he was. He fumbled for something to say before giving up and settling for an unimpressive, "Yeah." The woman that he'd vaguely noticed had been coming closer to him stopped. Harry turned his attention to her and froze. Those now tamed coffee curls, the hazel eyes tingling with curiosity...

"Hermione," he breathed. She looked only in her mid twenties. It faintly registered in Harry's mind that she should be almost forty by now, but he didn't question it as he gawked.

A small but warm smile tugged on her lips. "Hello, Harry. This must be quite a shock to you." The few Death Eaters remaining dispersed, going back to whatever duties had been previously assigned to them.

Hadrian notified, "I'm afraid I'm not in a position to talk to you at the moment, so I'll leave you in Hermione's care for now." He nodded to her and began to leave when Harry shouted, "Wait!" He stopped walking.

"Lucius...he won't be treated too badly, will he?"

"That is for Ron to decide. But if it concerns you so much, Hermione can inform you of an arrangement you may like." Lobbing a parting smile behind him, the Dark Lord glided out of the room with Harry wavering uncertainly behind him.

Was he supposed to run after him, demanding Lucius' release?

A load of good that will do.

Was he supposed to yell, fight, and make a nuisance of himself until he got thrown into the cells too?

...Was he supposed to be uncooperative for the sake of being uncooperative?

"Come, Harry." Hermione touched his shoulder, drawing back his attention. "I'll take you to your room."

“Room’? I’m going to have a room?”

“Yes.”

“You mean, not a holding cell or...or whatever?”

“Why would we do that?” she replied. He couldn’t hear the cryptic tone, but Harry was certain it was there. She gestured to an open archway entrance on the opposite side of the room. “Shall we?” Wordlessly, Harry followed.

They stepped into a hall carpeted with an oddly inviting granite floor. The creamy walls and simple golden candles clinging near their tops reminded him of one of the dreamy island resorts Harry had once longingly pined after in a few of Uncle Vernon’s old travel magazines.

He’d never got to go of course. He was always left with Mrs. Figg. Harry fought the bafflement whacking him in the head. Weren’t Dark Lords supposed to live in creepy, ghost infested dungeons?

He almost halted when he remembered what Hadrian had said to him just before they had portkeyed here: ‘Headquarters is at Potter Manor’. “Merlin...” Hermione gave him a patented concerned look that had him blurting, “We’re in Potter Manor?” He winced. This isn’t your Hermione. Don’t act so familiar!

A softened sadness appeared in her eyes that Harry wasn’t sure how to respond to. It was something that the Hermione he knew would do, knowing what coming to his ancestral home for the first time would have meant to him. “It is. I wouldn’t go around telling people about it, of course.”

He battled down his excitement. Suddenly, the entire place seemed to have a new lighting. This is where he would have grown up! This was his parents’ home! This was – wait... “Are my parents this alive here?”

Hermione stopped and Harry automatically did the same. With a sigh, she turned to him. “Your parents...Hadrian’s parents...were killed by Grindelwald.”

“Grindelwald?”

“Hadrian was almost seven at the time. They were the Ministry’s,” Harry noticed the slight distaste inflecting the word, “finest. Their four year old daughter died soon after in a Muggle air raid while with your maternal grandparents. I can’t say I know everything about your past, Harry, but in Hadrian’s, Sirius had...passed on in the war effort, and Remus, as a werewolf, wasn’t allowed to...” She trailed off as Harry closed his eyes, raking a hand through his untamable hair.

Even here they’re dead. A bitter smile wormed itself onto his mouth. And a sister...I would have had a sister. He asked quietly, “What was her name?”

“Your sister?”

“Yeah. My sister.”

“Rose.” Pause. “He always said she was a troublemaker, even at that age.”

And let me guess: he had to suffer through the Dursley’s as well.

It was so incredibly unfair that even in a completely different universe his family was murdered. Would he have had any other siblings other than...Rose?

Harry had come to accept the idea that he would never know his parents. He wouldn’t know their hopes, their interests, their preferences...but he’d never really thought about having a sister or a brother. I’ll never get to know what she was like, either. Loss lodged itself in his chest. He wondered what the Dark Lord must have felt when she died. Rose, it was strange thinking her name, would have been his last link to family.

Is that why he hates Muggles so much? That and the Dursleys? He thought back to what Dumbledore had explained to him when Harry had barged into his office and demanded he tell him whether or not

his suspicions were correct. Don't have to worry about confirming that anymore.

He shoved away the morbid thoughts and fished for something else. It wasn't hard. "Why am I here?"

"We wanted to take you out of the way of Dumbledore's manipulative tentacles. He's been deceiving you, Harry."

"Deceiving me about what?" he shot back. "About the fact that here I'm a-" The words skidded to bring to a standstill in his mouth. They didn't know about his...unique situation.

"About the fact that in this world, you are a labeled a Dark Lord?" she completed. At his expression, she explained, "We know what happened. In fact, I'm afraid that we had a bit of a part in that."

"This was your fault? But Luna was the one...wait." Hope welled up inside him. "Do you know how to send me back?"

"We do," she confirmed. "Or should I say, Luna does. It still astonishes me that she was correct about all of this. Alternate universes...it seems so impossible." Harry was grinning before he could stop himself, knowing that Hermione of all people would be disgruntled about Luna's seemingly crazy theory being correct. Then he reminded himself that he should be smiling.

His eyes searched the manor again, and a fresh welt of anger reared up inside him. Why hadn't Dumbledore ever told him about this place? What else had he been hiding?

"I imagine that you've been hearing a rather negative take on us."

He gave her an incredulous look at the understatement of the year.

"Don't judge too hastily, Harry. I know you aren't the type to fall for propaganda, but I'll say it anyway: what you've been hearing is only one side of the issue."

"Jasmine told me that you fancy yourselves 'political activists'."

“Jasmine isn’t the best example of what we are trying to accomplish, but she has the gist of it. We are trying to create a world for the better, a world where the government is based on merit and not on the so-called purity of one’s blood. To do that we must make sacrifices.”

“Sacrifices.” Cedric Diggory’s stunned faced flashed before his eyes. “Hadr – he said it himself: ‘I’ve killed hundreds either directly or indirectly’. How can you do that? How can you just brush all those innocent people off as sacrifices? You’ve killed so many people!”

She said after a moment, “Tell me, what do you know about the American Revolutionary War?”

“...Not much.”

“In a short, oversimplified summary, the American colonists revolted against the British Muggles. Like the current Ministry of Magic and the purebloods that run it, parliament’s members were furthering their own interests at the expense of the people they had a duty to care for. While they tried to be heard through long and futile peaceful negotiations, the colonists suffered through heavy taxes and unjust laws. They endured it for years with no promise of results. Parliament would only answer when it had something to lose; the colonists had nothing to negotiate with, so obviously, greed took precedence. Much like in our own government in regards to half-bloods and Muggleborns.”

Harry eyed her carefully, sensing a convincing argument on the horizon. They turned a corner and she persisted, “Needless to say, after the war countless thousands died. Those that lived had the freedom those that laid down their lives yearned for them to have. Future generations prospered.”

“But parliament started that. You’re starting this.”

She looked up at him. “You don’t consider the current state of our government instigation? Harry, people can be sent to Azkaban without trials or a defense. The Minister is not even voted; he is selected by the Department heads. There are no lawyers to keep

laws in effect; just look at the bias the Press is allowed to get away with! Magical creatures are enslaved, some officially, like house elves, and some unofficially, like the goblins.”

He hesitated and she requested, “So, Harry, give me an answer: what do you do when there is an evil you cannot defeat by just means? Do you stain your hands with evil to destroy evil, or do you remain steadfastly just and righteous even if it means that you surrender to that evil?” (1)

“I don’t...” Harry protested lamely. “That’s...but that’s...”

“Horrible? Of course it is. All of it is horrible. Appalling. No, worse than that. There is no word for it. And either way, evil remains. Which evil is less – now that is the true question. Those in power do not compromise their comfort with people with less power unless they have something to gain for it. Pretty words alone will not change anything. Action, on the other hand, fear, changes quiet a lot.”

“That’s really cynical,” Harry murmured.

“If you look at history, you may see differently. Is it cynical if it’s true? Time and time again, it is fear that causes change. I’m sure there are cases to the contrary, but overwhelmingly, that is what it is. Governments should fear their people. Our government has to fear us...”

“But how many more? How many more have to die because of this?”

“You asked how we can ‘brush off’ innocent people as sacrifices? Hadrian has a habit of making callous statements out of bravado, which I know you can relate to. He doesn’t mean it. We do not brush them off, contrary to what the Ministry accuses us of. We do the opposite. It is because of those lives that we must continue to fight. It is because of those lives that we must embrace carnage so that their deaths will not be in vain. We cannot stop now, after all that has been lost. We are doing this to better peoples’ lives, Harry. We are fighting for those who do not have the courage or the ability to fight for themselves. The Ministry will listen. We just have to overcome their stubborn resistance. It is the pattern of all revolutions.” She smiled



slowly, and Harry couldn't help but be reminded, despite what they were talking about and logic, of the trips he, she, and Ron had taken to Hogsmeade, or when she congratulated him after a Quidditch match. "But don't worry too much. In a month or two, it will be all over."

"What do you mean?" he asked in surprise. "A month or two? That's...really soon."

"And we won't have to lose any more people because of it. Now, here we are." She reached out a hand and took the handle of the door she was standing in front of. It opened, and Harry's eyes widened at the elegant and spacious dwelling within.

This is for me? Slightly awed, he stepped inside, running a finger over the cherry wood coffee table holding up a bonsai tree.

"Hugo and Teddy will come by later to help you adjust." Harry looked up at that announcement. He had been squeezing a maroon throw pillow on his bed almost as if to check it was actually there. They were coming after he'd battered them in dueling? "I know you don't know them that well, but they're good kids. Though I guess I'm biased since Hugo is my son." Harry almost tripped. It made sense, obvious sense, but to hear Hermione say it...she's not your Hermione!

Argh! Why did she have to look so much like his friend? Why did she have to be so nice to him?

"-Jasmine can't come because she's the Head Girl, which would of course be suspicious," Hermione was saying and Harry tuned himself back in. "And two Weasleys gone would also be too coincidental for taste. But I now I'm just rambling." She pointed to the lock on the inside of the door. "Keep out anyone you want, though it would be nice if you answer when someone knocks. Hadrian has arranged for your lunch and dinner to be brought into your room." Harry was briefly annoyed at himself for feeling so thankful at being rescued from the uncomfortable situation a dinner together would pose. It would have been a nightmare. "I'll see you soon, Harry."

As Hermione began to close the door behind her, Harry hesitated on the name before calling, "Hermione!" She looked back. "About that arrangement H...Hadrian was talking about."

"You mean the one about protecting the Malfoy boy?" She frowned at him. "I don't see why you would want to look out for someone who hates Muggleborns like me and was so incredibly rude to you, but I suppose I shouldn't be surprised by that. You've always been noble." Harry flushed at the compliment and looked away, but otherwise didn't say anything. "Those who perform exceptionally in battle can request something from Hadrian or an Inner Circle member. It may be granted or it may not, depending on the feat performed. You'll have to do a bit of work to win responsibility over the Malfoy child. He is a valuable POW. And the rest of your squad will have a minor reward if this happens; we try to encourage teamwork."

Harry paled. "Battle?"

"Of course," Hermione replied. "No one will push you to lend us a hand, though in the meantime, Ron will have say over him. You want to help us, don't you, Harry?" Her voice softened. "I know it will take you some time to adjust from Dumbledore's brainwashing, but you'll see. I'm certain you'll want to help."

Involuntarily, a sliver of guilt slithered down Harry's throat. He tried to shove it away, but it lingered. Why was he having this dilemma? He hadn't seen it firsthand, but he'd heard about the Dark Lord's activities from Tom, and Tom wasn't a bad person or a liar.

But then again, Hermione was right about sacrifices having to be made in battle, and they were doing this for good reasons. Perhaps they might not be exactly the same people, but...

This shouldn't be so difficult! But until he saw more, he was stuck in a grey area, longing for black and white again.

"I have to attend to my next assignment, so I'll talk to you later. Don't worry too much; everything will sort itself out." She shut the door, leaving Harry to shudder over the meaning of the word 'assignment'. Cautiously, he approached the door.

It was open. "They're not forcing me to stay here?" he wondered out loud. Was he allowed to explore the rest of the manor, too? "Aren't they worried I might escape?" There must be anti-apparation wards or something here. They wouldn't be so confident about this otherwise.

Or was it that they honestly trusted him not to leave?

Harry gritted his teeth. He would have loathed it if it was, and from the way Hermione treated him, like he was her friend, he could almost count it as a possibility. If it was true, he wouldn't be able to stand leaving.

And he had a feeling they knew it.

They're not your friends! You're not betraying them if you go!

He vented his frustration by hurling a pillow back onto the bed. Forget it! It's not like you can just leave anyway. Who else is going to tell you how to get back home? You've been waiting around for Dumbledore to hold up his promise and tell you anything he knows about it, but that hasn't happened. How much longer are you going to wait? Besides, he might have just been humoring you. Maybe he didn't even look into it at all...

Groaning, Harry fell back on his new bed, relaxing into the velvety covers. I wonder how Tom's going to take this...will he think I'd somehow planned all of this?

The Death Eater shoved her. "Go, girl. Find your pathetic bigot of a boyfriend and tell him what happened."

Bella glared murderously at the filthy Death Eater over her shoulder as she regained her footing. Regally, she straightened and made a show of dusting off the shoulder he'd touched. The Death Eater's lips curled at the subtle insult but otherwise said nothing. "It must be an

honor,” she said with a poisonous sweetness, “to be such a mindless lackey.”

“Shut up. Get moving.”

Bella caught her wand as he threw it to her. “It won’t be long until you’ve been kicked out of Hogwarts, and when that happens, I will laugh-”

“I said,” the Death Eater started to growl when another with a purple bindi interrupted.

“Calm yourself, Alpha 15. Let the wench get her last words in. They are all she has left.” He jerked his wand at her. “You have a fifteen second head start in our little game of hide and seek before we come after you. Run fast.”

Bella seethed.

“One...”

“May you rot in Hell,” she hissed and whirled around, sprinting down the hallway.

“Two...Three...four...”

Swallowing the urge to lob a curse over her shoulder, she picked up the pace. Where had Evander – no, Harry – said that they were supposed to hide?

The Death Eater’s taunting voice rang behind her. “Eight...nine...”

The girls’ bathroom on the second floor. A completely odd and ludicrous place in her opinion, but Tom wouldn’t have brought the Slytherins there if he didn’t have good reasons.

But was Harry lying?

He seemed sincere, but she supposed she’d just have to find out.

“Wow,” someone gushed behind him. “I can’t believe we’re in the Chamber of Secrets...”

Yes, well, I can’t believe it either, Tom mused. He peered above, the colossal statue of Salazar Slytherin scrutinizing him in return. Students milled about poking at the damp and grimy place and whispering to each other. It seemed that Harry was correct about the basilisk; it hadn’t shown itself yet, leaving the area relatively secure.

A pocket of fourth years were craning their heads so much Tom wondered if they would fall over. One of them was muttering something about ‘Slytherin’s monster’, but no one was paying him much attention since they were far too awed by their surroundings. Another round of ‘keep calm’ and restraining himself from berating ‘stop acting like four year olds’ wasn’t even necessary. If it wasn’t that, half an hour of such tediousness once before everyone had gotten in had been enough to fix that.

Nagini stirred. “Where mommy?”

Tom swept his eyes over the group. Where indeed. Was he still trying to keep up his unofficial prefect role? And for that matter, where was Bella? He still could neither find her, nor Lucius. “He will be here soon. Go to sleep.” Grumpily, she tucked her head under a wing and attempted to obey.

“Walden,” Tom called and McNair, the owner of the name, turned. “Have you seen Bella or Lucius?”

He shook his head in reply. “They left in the morning. I haven’t seen them since.”

Wonderful. Giving a smile to reassure anyone who was speculating whether the question hinted to something wrong, he started through the crowd again.

It had crossed his mind that they had returned to the common room later, or where in a position where they couldn't afford to leave. Perhaps they were forced to hide?

He withheld a sigh of frustration. To add more joy to his day, he was almost convinced that Harry was evading him at this point. The Gryffindor was, ironically, supposed to be his temporary second in command. Any complications such as two missing members of their House would be an issue he should be able to discuss with the boy. If not for ideas, at least for reassurance that neither of them would do anything potentially reckless to rectify the situation.

Reckless.

Hmm. A rather disturbing train of thought was going through Tom's head. Harry wasn't here and he hadn't seen him for almost half an hour. What if that was because Harry wasn't here?

"Sonorus. May I have your attention?" Nagini jumped and the many faces turned to him. "When was the last place that any of you saw Evander?"

There was a pause before Avery remarked, "The last place I saw him was at the top of the Chamber, in the bathroom." Murmurs of agreement fluttered around, and Tom felt dread spawn in the pit of his stomach.

"He was helping me down," another offered.

"Alright," Tom started again. "Who was the last person to come down here?"

Alecto answered. "That would be me."

"Quietus. Did he come down after you?"

"Not that I recall, but I wasn't paying much attention. I could be wrong."

Unlikely. Tom gritted his teeth. How could he not have heard Harry coming down behind him? He whipped out the Map and spoke, "I solemnly swear that I'm up to no good."

Inky lines began to crisscross the blank sheet of parchment. Vague walls were drawn because, since the makers hadn't known about the Chamber, they hadn't included it. The Map skipped to the schematics of the second floor.

Harry wasn't there, but Bella was and heading towards them. Relief washed through him. Harry must have told her where to go. But...why wasn't Lucius with her? And why wasn't Harry following?

"Walden, you're in charge. I'll be gone for a moment. Keep everyone here."

"Sure."

Still scouring the Map, Tom rushed out of the passage, ordering the door he arrived at to open, and ran up the stairs.

"Mommy fine?" Nagini ventured and Tom could hear the unease.

"Yes, yes. And it's mother. Mother is fine."

The third floor flitted onto the Map's surface. A professor was there, but otherwise there was no one he knew.

Fourth floor. Nothing. The fifth yielded only Death Eaters. Sixth was a failure. Seventh was worse.

"Where is he?" he hissed, foreboding searing his stomach. Ice coursed through his veins. He couldn't find Lucius, but that could be explained; he could be hiding. He could might never have been with Bella in the first place. But Harry was gone and he had no reasoning for that.

Where the Hell was he?

Tom burst through the top of the stairs, which had opened into the bathroom, and stepped onto the tile floor, breathing hard. People didn't just disappear from Hogwarts!

Unless they were removed from it.

Tom swore. If anyone else had heard, they would never have believed the Head Boy did it, let alone was capable of the act.

"The Death Eaters," he realized furiously. "They must have come for him!"

How could he not have seen it? Of course they would make their move – Ronald bloody Weasley had seen Harry in Hogsmeade!

Tom introduced his boot to the nearest stall, ignoring Nagini's hiss/squeal. "You reckless Gryffindor!" It didn't take a genius to come to the conclusion that Harry had embarked on some foolhardy mission to rescue innocent bystanders.

Betrayal? No. Tom had finally become convinced of Harry's sincerity, and with the revelations that had occurred not even an hour before...

"Harry has been captured by Death Eaters."

The words hung, thick and heavy, in the air.

Just when they had come to a point where Tom could trust the boy, he had been snatched. And another, more selfish part of him thought: Just when I met someone who carries the same burden and knows what it's like...

What would Hadrian do to him? Would he hurt him? Imprison him? Would he use Harry's affection for his friends to brainwash him?

The next time he saw Harry, would he be facing the opposite end of his wand?



Releasing another rather vicious expletive, Tom snapped, "Mischief managed!" and shoved the Map in his pocket. His wand at his side, he wrenched open the door, only to smack straight into Bella head on.

The two crashed on their backs on the floor. Nagini hissed intelligibly, flapping her bat-like wings to regain her hold around Tom's shoulders. He plucked her off his back and put her on the floor.

Groaning, Bellatrix massaged her forehead. "I should have known it was you," she sniped through a veil of her dark ringlets. "Only your skull could be that thick."

"Compliment accepted," Tom rejoined wryly, drawing himself up and offering her a hand, which she took. "I would ask what you were doing barreling through the halls like a rabid chimera, but I'm glad you're here."

Her smile was short lived. "Tom – Lucius, he was–"

"Where is he?" he demanded sharply. The way she said it promised ill tidings.

Bella hesitated, recalling Harry's ruthless but necessary words. "He was..."

"Don't draw it out!"

"Hadrian took him."

Tom jerked involuntarily. "Hadrian? Hadrian is here?"

Noting the sudden paleness of his skin, she rushed on, "He was. Harry bargained for Lucius' life. He's safe."

"That is hardly–" Abrupt halt. 'Harry'?

Bella's eyes narrowed. "You knew," she accused. "You knew all along that he wasn't 'Evander James'! You didn't just know he had secrets – you knew what the secret was!" Oh, she knew the logic, but it still hurt that he hadn't said anything!

"Yes," he admitted. Harry bargained for Lucius' life? Lucius' life? Had Hadrian attempted to kill his friend?!

Bellatrix looked about ready to attack him. Tom suddenly realized what he had just confessed to by extension, so he defended, "I wanted to tell you, truly, I did, but I couldn't! The less people knew, the better and-"

"If you had just given Lucius and I some assurance, no matter how vague," she interrupted coolly, "neither of us would have been where we were today! 'Evander' would have never come after us."

"What...what do you mean?"

"We went away from the common room because Lucius wanted to talk to me privately about Evander. That conversation would never have taken place if you had just trusted us."

"I do trust you," he responded faintly as the implications crashed down on him. "I just didn't think...I didn't want you both to have to..." Utter misery drenched his face. A large part of it was his fault that his friend was in danger and Harry, too.

Unwillingly, Bella felt a twinge of guilt. Darn you, Tom...Without thinking, she crossed the distance between them and wrapped him in a hug, her cheek leaning against his shoulder. "You did what you thought was best." His arms tightened around her, and Bellatrix felt another twinge of guilt, but for a completely different reason.

You're supposed, she mentally slapped herself, to be comforting him! Not inhaling his cologne! Which, she settled on, was fresh mint.

Why she grabbing mother? Nagini flicked her tongue in the air, puzzled. At first she thought it was an assault, but mother seemed to like it. Ruffling her lightly feathered wings and deciding to forget about it, Nagini flounced towards the tantalizing mouse hole she smelled.

Tom sighed quietly, closing his eyes. It was oddly relieving to be like this, standing here and holding her. The horror, guilt, and panic

seemed to dull, even though they were still convulsing near the surface of his thoughts. Her hair is even softer than it looks...

Wait. Pardon?

Tom pulled out of the embrace so quickly that he felt whiplash. Highly inappropriate thought, for the situation or otherwise, detected. Bellatrix blinked up at him, slight puzzlement playing in her almond eyes. Trawl for a topic. Now. "The Chamber – inside. We should go." Smooth, Riddle. Very smooth. "It's a safe place." His inner critic snorted derisively. No, it's actually a lethal one. Obviously! Unfortunately, Tom had to agree.

Bellatrix tried to swat away the annoying and highly persistent disappointment stalking her. Instead, she asked, "What about Lucius and Harry?"

"We can't do anything for them now. We have to keep everyone else safe."

"They appear," she motioned towards the empty bathroom, "safe to me. Where did you put them? You can't tell me that they're hiding in the stalls..."

He looked at her. "They're in the Chamber of Secrets." Incredulity flung itself onto her face. "The entrance is in here," Tom supplied. "Admittedly it's the perfect hiding place."

"But isn't there supposed to be a monster in there?"

"Why yes, there is. It's a basilisk." As soon as he finished, an idea occurred to him.

"A basilisk?"

"Bella," he grabbed her arm, "the basilisk – we can use it to eliminate the Death Eaters! It can travel through the pipes-"

"Slow down for a moment! There is a basilisk in the Chamber?"

“Yes.”

It was times like these when she wished she had a beater’s bat in her hand. “Well I certainly hope it’s a friendly one!”

“Don’t give me that look! I’m a parselmouth. I can control it. At least, according to Harry.”

“Harry was the one who found this place?”

“It’s a long story.”

“One you better tell me.”

“Not now, but yes, I certainly will. But just think about it – a basilisk’s gaze is like Nike incarnate on our side!”

Bellatrix was silent for a moment. “Its gaze can kill.”

Tom’s infectious mood faded somewhat before steel glinted in his eyes. “If you had to choose between the lives of Death Eaters or the lives of students and, potentially, the staff, which would you choose?”

“...Students, but maybe there’s a way to use the basilisk without killing.”

Tom frowned, the possibilities and the knowledge he had about the magical serpent flowing through his mind. “I suppose it’s possible...if the gaze is indirect. But I can’t be sure. For all we know, an indirect gaze could also kill.”

Bellatrix walked over to the knight standing guard in front of the wall and plucked its helmet off. Ignoring its protests, she transfigured it into a fat, ugly rat. “Test Subject Number One?” The amorphous wad of rodent shrieked and whacked its worm-like tail against her hand.

“Mouse!” Nagini was jubilant.

As Tom restrained her from pouncing on the rat, he watched it struggle. “Do you think you can make it to the Headmaster’s Office?”

This week's password is 'Blood Pops'; he's currently attending a Wizengamott meeting, but you might be able to contact someone in the Ministry to get him. I'll wake up our new friend."

"My mother should be there, though my father will be at the Wizengamott as well."

Tom lifted the Marauders' Map, checking the route she would have to take. "It's clear." She nodded, taking off, and Tom paused as the Map flipped to the dungeons where Andy was lying in the Slytherin Common Room. What had Harry meant when he'd said 'he's the Map'?

Knock, knock.

Harry picked himself off his new bed and cautiously made his way to the door. He stopped for a moment. From the juxtaposed breathing, he guessed that there were two people standing outside. His hand hovered uncertainly over the lock.

May as well. The door was unlocked and opened, revealing Hugo's excited face and Teddy's composed one.

"Hi," Hugo greeted, immediately flooding into the room without waiting for a reply.

Harry was torn between telling him to get out for that or just letting it go.

"May I," Teddy inquired rather dryly in response to his companion's rude behavior, "come in?"

"Go ahead," was the mumbled reply. As Teddy streamed passed him, he asked, "Are Ron and Hermione okay?" Alright, so this world's Hermione wasn't the one he knew, but he couldn't help but worry about her. They were similar, and if she went on a raid, or whatever it was, then she could have been hurt. Ron might have been on one too.

Hugo threw him a weird look. "You mean my mum and dad, right? Yeah, they're okay. Very okay." A vicious smile made its way onto his mouth.

His wariness kicking up a notch, Harry shut the door. "Why are they 'very okay?'" Hugo plopped down on an arm chair without invitation. Teddy shot him a disapproving frown before approaching another seat and casting Harry a question look. He received a nod in reply, and slowly sank into it.

"Mr. Weasley," Teddy explained, "put Lucius in the cell directly across from his parents. Needless to say, the Malfoys were torn between horror, joy, and pain at seeing one another again."

"Ha! Gits deserve it! I might go down there and shove it in Pretty Boy's face. You want to come, Teddy?"

"I think I'll decline, thank you."

Hugo grinned at Harry. "Since you had to suffer through the prick for three whole months, you might want to go when you get the chance. Pay back and all."

Harry stamped down on the urge snap at him. Logic was advising him to appear neutral about the entire situation; it would gain him more trust, more information, more freedom, and neutrality instead of outright willingness would seem far more realistic.

So instead gave a weak smile. "Do you suppose I could see him now?"

Hugo's face fell a bit. "Not now. People only get the privilege of seeing prisoners if they're decorated. Sorry, but you're just not that trusted yet even if you are practically a mini of our lord." A silence. Then suddenly he exclaimed, "It's so cool that Jasmine and you," he glanced at Teddy, "we're right about him! I never get to know any of this stuff. It's just awesome that you're from another universe, Harry!"

Harry started, but before he could reply, Teddy observed, "I thought you said that your mother and father don't tell you anything."

"Mum was furious with dad when she heard him say it, but hey, too late!"

Ron. Harry nervously ran a hand through his hair. If there was one person he wasn't looking forward to see again, it was him. The last time they'd met, Harry had disarmed him. What was he going to think of Harry now?

He's not the same Ron, you idiot...And yet he couldn't shake that feeling that made him want to avoid him as much as humanly possible. This Ron had tried to protect him, even though he had known as little about Harry as Harry had known about him.

"Harry, we came here because we thought you would like to know that there is a meeting in a few minutes," Teddy informed him.

Harry tensed. A Death Eater meeting?

"Mr. Weasley said that our lord would have you assigned to our squad, Lambda, if you ever decided to lend a hand. I wouldn't doubt that he'll be elated. Any fighting team could use a campeador."

Harry's vehemence at what he was suggesting quelled. "Campeador'? What's that?"

The studious metamorphagus was surprised but didn't comment. "It is hard to explain what a campeador is. It would be best if you saw for yourself."

"From yourself," Hugo inserted.

Harry rolled his eyes and Teddy continued. "It is a genetic ability, much like my own metamorphic one. However, until our lord was born, it was believed to be extinct. I think it would be better if I put it in a more historical perspective." He leaned back, his fingers in a steeple. "A campeador, which means 'master of the military arts' in Late Latin or 'champion' in other versions, is faster, stronger, and heals more quickly than even a vampire. Of course, that is only from what has been witnessed so far, which isn't saying much. There hasn't been a

recorded one that lived beyond twenty two, so it can't be certain what the pinnacle of their skills is. Depending on the society they were in, the average death varied. Back in the time of the Roman Empire, the average one died at sixteen. They might become even stronger than that, though naturally, age would eventually take its toll."

"Sixteen?" Harry repeated in disbelief. "Merlin! What were they doing that got them killed so young?"

"In Rome? Likely the wizard versions of the Coliseum. Campeadori were the best fighters to watch. In the oldest societies, they were warriors. Later they were converted into entertainment, assassins, and 'champions', which is where they got their name. I mean the last in the worst sense."

Harry sat down on his bed. "Go on."

"The definition of a champion is someone who ultimately wins against several fights against their opponents, sometimes in a competition. Muggles always had knights, but one 'champion' knight that would fight for them. They used it to decide politics."

"Wait," Harry held up a hand, "I think I see where this is going. You mean they chose a campeador and had him or her battle against another one to decide which law was going to get passed?"

"Precisely. It only became restricted to one, though, after their numbers dwindled dangerously low. Normal wizards don't stand much of a chance against them. After all, on top of whatever their magical skills are, they can also dodge and cast spells so much more quickly. Unlike most wizards duels where everything is long range, campeadori can have the ability to rush their opponents. At that point, the duel could be ended with a single punch. People soon decided it was useless to have conventional wars. They just brought as many campeadori as they could find, forced them to swear an Unbreakable Vow of loyalty, and had them fight to the death against the campeadori army of whichever lord was challenging them."

"That's barbaric!"



"It was. Families were always afraid that their teen might end up showing signs of that particular trait. They would have to go into hiding if they wanted to protect them."

Harry asked, "'Teen'?"

"The abilities manifest near the middle of the transition from adolescence to adulthood."

That explains a lot. For a while Teddy stared pensively ahead of him and Hugo fiddled with his robes as they mulled over that bright era of Wizarding history. "How fast and strong is a vampire? I've only got Muggle information to go by, so I don't really know."

"You really," Teddy said, "have to see for yourself. Think of it this way: the average vampire can accomplish the feats of an Olympic gold medalist. The lowliest one can at least perform on a professional level. Based on conjecture, your abilities should completely manifest at your physical peak. That would be around twenty five or so."

So I have eight more years of accidentally breaking things to go? Harry wondered in aggravation.

"So," Teddy steered back to their original topic, "are you going to come to the meeting?"

The green-eyed boy scowled, opening his mouth for a heated refusal, when he realized that the only way he could keep Lucius from being mistreated – possibly tortured– would be to claim him as a 'spoil of war'. He thought back to his world. Ron and his family had loathed the Malfoys. If it was that bad there, it would be even worse here, where they wouldn't have any inhibitions.

If he wanted to protect him, he had to gain trust...and decorations.

"Alright," Harry heard himself saying. "I'll go."

"Great!" Hugo jumped up. "Come on. I bet you'll have a spare robe and mask in the wardrobe." He yanked open Harry's armoire and, sure enough, dark black robes lay inside, a golden mask gleaming on

top of it. Rummaging for the mask, Hugo tossed the robes at Harry, which he caught. "Go on, put them on. They're good quality. Mum made sure."

Harry held the robes as if he expected them to eat him alive. Death Eater robes. He was putting on Death Eater robes.

Gingerly, he peeled off his Hogwarts ones and placed them on. The phantom-like material settled softly over him, a perfect fit.

Hugo handed him the mask and waited. "What are you waiting for?"

"Hugo," Teddy chided. "Let him take his time. It must be difficult to choose sides so suddenly and after hearing only one view." For the first time, Harry noticed that the two of them already had their Death Eater garbs on; it was a subtle difference, but the robes were finer, more elegant, with an undercurrent of red.

Gryffindor colors, he mused, bitterness in the words. Harry peered down at the leonine mask again. A symbol that he guessed was lambda was inscribed in the center of the forehead with the Roman numeral 21 below it. Taking a breath, he slowly brought it to his face and felt a tingle as the charms activated, keeping it cool against his skin and secure.

It's different, he decided, when you wear it. Like the world has changed. He didn't know if it was an affect of the mask or not, but he felt like he was shifting into 'soldier mode'.

Teddy and Hugo watched him for a second before putting on their own masks. "Ready?"

"Yeah. Ready."

The three headed out, Harry casting colloportus, a Locking Charm, on the door. He followed them down the winding hall until they came to the room Harry had first arrived in. A few Death Eaters were already inside, while others were appearing, their hands sliding off pieces of jewelry as they did so. Portkeys, Harry noted. It seemed

that because of the Fidelus Charm, apparition was useless. Or was it because Potter Mansion Unplottable? The probability was high.

As he went in, Harry decided that it was like willingly throwing yourself into a snake pit. He twitched at the slightest sound, his senses picking up every breath out of rhythm, every footstep out of sync, and every eye that passed in his direction. Under his mask, he told himself, he was anonymous. No one but Teddy and Hugo knew who he was.

Since Harry had left before, chairs had been either conjured or moved in. A wide screen was on the wall they were facing, almost half the size of one from a Muggle movie theatre. A muscular, rearing lion with crimson eyes stood out from the screen, the air around it emblazoned with a blood red mist. "Technomagic," Teddy enlightened when he pointed at it. "We use a lot of Power Points for our meetings."

The chairs filled up and a tall redheaded man strode up to the dais, his strides long and purposeful. Harry stiffened before he reminded himself that Ron wouldn't recognize him. He was just another mask in a sea of gold. "I thought Had – me – him – the Dark Lord," Harry finally settled on, muttering in Teddy's ear, "was going to host this?"

Harry couldn't see the smile, but he heard it. "No. If he did, half the people here would be in too much awe to listen. Lambda is relatively low and new in the ranks; no one here is an Inner or Outer Circle member. We're all part of the, and mind you, this is an unofficial term, the Outer Rim. Alpha is our lord's personal squad. Mr. Weasley probably only took this position because his son is here."

Harry stored that away, guessing that the 'Outer Rim' was made up of initiates and undecorated fighters. Teddy and Hugo were still in Hogwarts, after all. The rest couldn't be much older...or much more trusted.

"Welcome, Lambda," Ron spoke and all noise died. The Death Eaters, who had already straightened as he came in, stood. Alarmed, Harry quickly scrambled to do the same. Was this like in the Muggle military,

with the whole 'captain on the bridge' sort of treatment? "The meeting will now begin."

The rearing lion on the screen faded into a series of five faces. Names were printed underneath the picture in clear bold. Harry didn't recognize any of them, but as his eyes skimmed the names, he stopped at one: Vitruvius L. Yaxley.

Recognition flashed in his eyes. Yaxley was one of Voldemort's first supporters and a skilled duelist back in his world. He seared the man's photograph in his mind, the brutally chiseled features, sallow skin, and empty eyes burning into his memory. It was hard to forget a face like that, but Harry had an extra incentive to remember him. While he knew Yaxley wasn't a Death Eater in this world, he undoubtedly wasn't exactly an upstanding citizen or a particularly kind person.

"In three days at 2 pm you will meet in this room. We will then disembark for Lancaster from here after the portkeys are reprogrammed. Our arrival point mirrors the environment produced for your training grounds. I don't think I need to tell you to use your knowledge of it to your advantage."

So the Death Eaters do train, Harry thought. If the place they've been training in is a recreation of the place they're going to attack, this must have been planned for some time.

"The faces on the screen are your targets. Detain as many as you can. Do what is necessary if detaining them is not practical." It didn't take much imagination to guess what that meant.

The faces and their names shrunk, moving to the top of the screen as two new images appeared below them. On the left was a photo of what seemed like a standard Muggle office building. The one on the right was a diagram of the first floor with a red line darting from the entrance and running towards the men's and women's bathrooms.

"As you've been told in training, this Microsoft building is the entrance to Lancaster's office for the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. Keep in mind that any creatures in

transit there should not be harmed unless they are attacking you. The first fireteam will come with me.”

Hugo whispered, “The fireteams consist of three members. The first fireteam are Lambda 1 through 3. We’re Lambda fireteam seven since I’m Lambda 20 and Teddy is Lambda 19.” (2)

“Oh. Thanks.” Ron’s eyes speared him and Harry stilled. Merlin, he can be worse than McGonagall...

The man’s narrowed eyes left him and he continued. “Fireteam two, you will be the first group to approach security. When they ask for wand identification, place them under Imperius. Order them to apparate back home and amuse themselves for two hours. Fireteam three, you have the task of apprehending the first man on the list. Memorize his face. Fireteam four, you have the second, and so on and so forth.”

That left Harry, who, since he was number 21 and in fire team seven, with the job of subduing Yaxley. A nagging thought nudged him: were all these people actually necessary to capture, or was just one necessary, but Ron didn’t want to reveal which one was the true target?

It’s something I would do, Harry pondered, if I didn’t want anyone seeing a pattern in who I was attacking.

As Ron designated duties, Hugo uttered under his breath, though the excitement was still palpable, “I bet mum will be voted Head of the Department of Mysteries once we get rid of our target, that Yaxley guy. Won’t that be great?”

Harry didn’t answer. It occurred to him that he’d just been part of a breach in the secrecy the Unspeakables had, but he didn’t quite care.

Ron reminded the Death Eaters that Lambda had training at 7 pm for the next two days. Then, a few minutes later, the meeting ended. The rearing lion appeared on the screen again before fading into the typical black, indicating the technology was turned off. Ron placed his wand arm over his heart and dismissed, “To a brighter tomorrow.”

The Death Eaters stood and did the same. "To a brighter tomorrow." The masked characters reached for their portkeys, vanishing.

Harry started to leave for his room when Teddy stopped him. Ron beckoned them forward, and Harry tried not to make it too obvious that he was reluctant to go.

Hugo ripped off his mask. "So, any inside info you can give us, Rook?"

"Hugo, you know I can't do that. Just follow orders. They're no need for questions."

Teddy took off his mask much more calmly and Harry unwillingly followed suit, knowing it would seem strange and make his feelings evident otherwise.

"Come on," Hugo whined. "Who's the real target from those five?"

So I was right.

"It isn't policy to tell initiates until they're proven themselves disciplined enough to perform their duty."

You mean kill or capture, Harry shuddered, avoiding Ron's eyes the entire time.

"I can be trusted! It's not like I won't try hard..."

"You're still a kid. Knowing the main target will cause you to neglect your target. Others may even hesitate in their duties if they know the true target personally." Harry couldn't help but flinch, feeling as if the comment was directed at him. "Harry."

He froze. Slowly, he raised his eyes to Ron's, forcing himself to hold the gaze. But Ron seemed to read something there, because he told him quietly, "Don't beat yourself up. I forgive you. But things are different now. Make it up by proving yourself in Lancaster." Hesitantly,

Harry nodded, unsure of how to respond. He didn't doubt that they'd be watching him for qualms and indecisive moments.

You can't afford that. You've got to at least make up for this entire situation by making sure Lucius is alright.

"Dad..."

"There is no room for argument. If you do well in battle, Hugo, you will be able to proudly wear the title 'Death Eater'. Earn it, don't ask for it."

The boy puffed out his chest. "I'll be exceptional, don't you worry! You'll see, dad; I'll get decorated in my very first battle!"

"Hugo..." Ron sighed. His eyes fell on all of them, but particularly on Harry. "No one, especially at your age, is expected to be decorated and an official Death Eater after their first battle. Or their third," he nodded to Teddy. "Harry, I'm not even sure that you should go."

Despite himself, Harry flushed in anger both because he felt that he was insinuating that he wasn't skilled, and in guilt because he seemed to be saying, 'I don't trust you'. Of course, it was justified, but...

Ron quickly added, "It isn't because of the Hogsmeade incident. It's because every person who joins us is assigned to a squad. After you're assigned, you come three times a week during your assigned time to train with your squad members. We train everyone in teams and usually wait a month after a new member is inducted before an assignment. You're used to fighting as an individual."

"I see," Harry murmured. It made sense. He saw how he was fighting as a soldier instead of a dueler just hours ago in the testudo formation. He'd be likely to go off on his own. "Why do you train like that?"

"Mrs. Weasley," Teddy elucidated, "was the one who came up with the idea. In the Muggle military, troops are trained in teams and taught to rely on their fellow soldiers. In battle, the trust they've built

helps calm them. They don't feel as if they're all alone with no protection. Team mentalities boost confidence and morale."

"That's...smart," Harry couldn't help but say. This is far more organized than Voldemort's lackeys, he reflected. It's like he's more of a terrorist. These guys are more of an army.

"Like I said, Harry," Ron drew his attention back. "You don't have to come. It hasn't even been a day yet. No one expects you to fight. If you don't think you can do it, don't. You can't have indecision in battle. It will just be a hazard to your fireteam and your squad."

Harry thought about Lucius locked up in his cell somewhere in the manor. He thought about what the Ron and Hermione in his world would do. He thought about what Sirius or Remus would say.

And Tom. What would he think if he saw Harry right now?

You don't have much choice. If he wanted to get any hope of leaving this place, he had to gain trust. If he wanted to gain some rights, he had to move up. "I want to go."

Ron opened his mouth to object, but Harry cut across him.

"I want to go. I won't be indecisive. I learned long ago that once you're fighting for your life, there's no room for that. You've got to do what you've got to do. I don't know any of these people personally; in fact, Yaxley was a Dark wizard back in my world. I almost have a reason to go after him." Pausing for a moment, he stepped closer, letting the cold determination that had settled in his belly gleam in his eyes. "I've faced plenty of pressure as the Boy Who Lived. I had to go alone against the Dark Lord in my realm plenty of times. I've led my own forces into the heart of the Department of Mysteries. I won't crack and desert."

The four in the room had gone silent in his speech, staring at him with varying degrees of speculation, surprise, and consideration.

"I'll do it. Just give me an order."



(1) Almost a quote, but close enough that I decided to reference this, from Lelouch Vi Britannia from Code Geass.

(2) In case anyone was wondering, fireteams are supposed to have 4 members, but I have a reason for Hadrian's obsession with 3's and its multiples.

A/N: OK, so this chapter was one of those "explanation" and "set-up" chapters. Sorry, but it had to be done...I hope I cleared things up in this chapter though, since some of you were raising every brows at a few parts, like the whole campeador(i) issue. If you thought it was too much, thanks for baring with it. I know some of you were hoping for a Harry vs. Hadrian confrontation, but I've planned it for later; besides, Hermione's supposed to be the smart one here :)

For anyone who wants to help out, I leave the following questions:

1. Harry's passive approach - did you expect him to fight instead or think he should have?
2. What do you think about what Hermione told Harry? Do you think she's justified? Think she's just telling him what he wants to hear?
3. I'm just interested to know how you expected the Death Eaters and Hadrian to treat Harry.
4. Did this chapter make anyone want Harry to join his counterpart?
5. What did you think of Harry's decision in the end?
6. Is Harry appropriately confused or do you think I should have elaborated more on that?
7. Other comment or suggestions?

As always, thanks for reading!

## Chapter Thirteen

It was times like this when Bellatrix had to wonder why Madam Pomfrey didn't demand loitering fines. She'd make a fortune from it, considering the sheer multitude of students lingering around the Hospital Wing, hoping to catch a glimpse of the Petrified Death Eaters within. Only the suicidal dared to venture close to the doors.

...which was why Bella was questioning whether or not she should walk into the Hospital Wing for a legitimate reason this time. After all, the state of her sanity was very important to her.

"I realize it's satisfying to gloat about the humiliating defeat the basilisk handed them," she told the immobile Tom beside her, "but why are we still here? The mandrakes won't be ready for several months. It's been three days. The Death Eaters aren't exactly going to get up and swim laps in the Lake any time soon."

He turned his eyes on her and the expression inside them made her pause. It was the detached calculation of someone contemplating how to go about and get away with a crime. She'd seen it the time he'd considered how to put Umbridge 'out of commission' for a week and how to catch Weasley in their third year. Did she want to know why she was seeing it again?

"Do you know what the teachers are telling anyone curious enough to ask about 'Evander'?"

"Naturally: he's on temporary leave for family matters. But I doubt that's what's on your mind right now. It's what he said about the Map, isn't it?" He didn't answer. "I was doing some thinking and research on it..."

"You don't need to do that anymore."

She really didn't like where this seemed to be going. "And why is that?"

"Because I already know what he meant."

“You...you do?” She blinked. “Well, that’s good. What is it?”

Tom considered. It was instinct to him to work alone...but this time, he would need to go with logic. Wordlessly, he took her arm and guided her into an empty classroom. As he opened the door, he scanned the room, checking for portraits. There were none. He checked for any sort of spells or objects that could potentially be used as spies. None.

“Tom?”

“Just a moment.” Privacy spells threw themselves into the air. “There. Now, to your question...it occurred to me that whatever Harry was talking about with the Map somehow involved Andy. After your account on how he attacked you, the answer became clear.”

A dark look crossed Bella’s face. As Tom has predicted, the teachers had been too busy with their temporary employments as the last line of defense for the school to physically run to the Ministry and alert Dumbledore. Bellatrix had to be the one to use all her political leverage as the middle Black daughter to interrupt the Wizengamott meeting.

Once Dumbledore had returned from the Wizengamot and fought off any of the Death Eaters that hadn’t been Petrified by the basilisk, the school had forced itself to settle back into its regular routine, sans the conglomeration around the Hospital Wing.

Bella had gone to Dumbledore by herself and given her account of events, relating her and Lucius’ capture as well as how the Death Eaters had entered. However, when Dumbledore called Andy privately to his office later on because of the charges, the boy claimed to have no knowledge of what had happened. He hadn’t even had the slightest idea of who was accusing him.

Andy had even searched them out to offer condolences for what had happened to Lucius, whose disappearance the former trio was acutely aware of. She’d almost lunged at him then, but Tom had

stopped her, giving Andy a warm smile and a 'thank you' that almost convinced her to use him for a substitute punching bag.

Dumbledore was a legilimens. If he said Andy didn't know, he didn't.

It was clear something else was in play here. Possession, perhaps. Neither Tom nor Bella had mentioned what 'Andy' had done to anyone else. They weren't going to accuse him if he was essentially innocent.

"Andy is being possessed by a horcrux."

"What?" Pureblood dignity destroyed, she demanded, "How did you come to that conclusion? How is that even possible? Horcruxes can't...can they?"

"Unfortunately, yes. Granted, the Hogwarts library has barely any mention of horcruxes, let alone a book on them. However...certain bookstores in Knockturn Alley don't share this trait."

She muttered, "How could I have forgotten? The book Lucius bought you last Christmas." After Dumbledore had told Tom about the Dark Lord's secret to immortality, Tom had, in his typical fashion, raided the library for any mention of their weaknesses. But Hogwarts was a school. He hadn't found anything.

"If an individual in close contact with a horcrux becomes attached to the soul inside, the soul can begin to control them. The victim's affection causes him or her to 'pour out' his or her soul to the horcrux, who is able to 'pour in' its soul. In time, they exchange places. Now, what recent object did Andy become attached to?"

"The Map!" she realized. "The person writing in it, Saber – he isn't..?" More silence. Tom twirled his wand in his hand, watching her reaction. The uncanny quiet made her realize another thing. "You're not going to tell Dumbledore about this."

"I will. Eventually." A faraway look drifted over him. "I just want to have a chat with Hadrian for a moment."

She didn't need to be his best friend to hear the second meaning embedded in the words and wasn't sure how she felt about the next revelation. "You want to interrogate him," Bella deadpanned. "And you don't want Dumbledore to know." Her first reaction was shock and horror. The next that followed on its heels was undiluted benefit analysis.

She kicked that reaction aside. He's innocent. He's a friend. We can't do that to him.

Deflecting the statement, Tom said, "I need you to bring him here."

Bella didn't answer for a moment. Would Andy be hurt or would the fact that they would be talking to the horcrux mean that he wouldn't be?

Would it be worth it even if he was?

A delay. She wanted a delay so that she wouldn't have to make the decision on the spot. So she picked a possible flaw in the plan. "Do you have an idea of how I'm going to do that, or are we going to brainstorm?"

"I imagine that you could simply go up and ask. The type of persuasion you use will be key. He will have to leave immediately and still be relatively relaxed and unsuspecting when he walks through the door." Tom leaned against the desk. "I trust you can do it."

Bella stared at him. "Alright, I heard the joke, but not the sarcasm. I think you need to work on that part."

"I am serious."

"I can't think of any reason to lead him to an inconspicuous location that's pleasant. Unless you're suggesting I seduce him." Her voice turned poisonously sweet. "You're not asking for me to do that, are you?" If you are, you can stop worrying about Hadrian. I'll kill you!

"No! Just...I can't ask him. I have to be in the right...mindset..."

She understood. "Whoever interrogates him has to be ready to do what they have to do."

"Yes."

"I don't want to do this."

The detached look flickered. "I don't either," he told her quietly. "But we are interrogating the horcrux, not Andy. He just needs to take a hold of the Map," he pulled it from his robes. Andy had had it in his robes instead of in his dormitory when the horcrux was using him. It seemed likely that contact was a requirement until the soul piece had fully poured itself into him. "If Hadrian is the one in control, he should be the one feeling our spells. Nothing we use will be permanent. Any injuries will be attended to in the Hospital Wing."

"Whether it's permanent or not, it still bothers me."

"It will be more intimidation tactics."

"If that...thing in Andy is part of the Dark Lord's soul, he won't be intimidated."

"His mutilated semblance of a life is on the line. He will speak if I begin attacking the Map. If that doesn't work, then I'll think of something."

'I'll think of something'. That vague answer that didn't even address the issue she had brought up and sounded suspiciously like a way to avoid admitting that Dark curses were an option. The part of her that wanted answers warred with the part that wanted to protect her friend.

Or should I say, my other friend. I have a duty to help Lucius. And Andy won't feel anything. The horcrux will. But what guarantee did they have of that?

It seemed to make sense. If Andy wasn't aware of anything he was doing under the horcrux's influence, when why would he be aware of any pain that might occur?

She warned him, "You're walking a very thin line here. We aren't exactly the most objective people to do this; it will be easy to go too far."

"Then help me," he compelled her. "Make sure that I don't."

Another reason to consent, she thought. Tom was determined to do this. She knew him. He believed that the ends justified the means; he saw his Boy Who Lived status as a forced martyrdom. He believed that he had to do what others weren't willing to, whether morally or otherwise, in order to defeat Hadrian. If she didn't fetch Andy, he would either have someone else do it, or do it himself. No one would be there to hold him back if she wasn't there. She didn't trust that anyone else would stand up to him. Few people had before, unless they were Gryffindors, but she doubted that he'd recruit a Gryffindor for this.

"Fine," Bella half growled. "I'll do it. I'll go get him."

"Thank you."

"You're," she glared over her shoulder as she left, "welcome." She had time to hear him tell her that he was in the library before she shut the door.

Alright, I'll just ask Andy about arithmancy. If worse comes to worst, I'll claim I know a friend who wants me to ask him to Hogsmeade. Immature? Yes. But his curiosity will win out. I'm certain of it.

The library was on the fourth floor, which meant that she had to walk up three flights of stairs until she got there. Ignoring the cases and cases of books, she peered around until she noticed the tell-tale mop of straw hair.

"Wonderful," Bella muttered to herself. He was writing an essay, text books piled on his left and ink on his right. She couldn't help but recall how he had twisted her arm and forced her to crawl across the floor after him as he taunted them all. But that wasn't him. It was Hadrian.

And yet Andy was going to have to be the vessel they used to communicate with the horcrux.

The Map could be written in but it wouldn't divulge its secrets without the appropriate 'encouragement'. You have to force yourself to see past the face of your friend. When the horcrux is in control, he isn't your friend.

Merlin! She didn't want to do this. But the horcrux had taken Lucius, her best friend, her sister's boyfriend, and her mother's godson. If he knew how to get Lucius back, he was going to talk. If he knew how to get Harry back, he was going to talk. Neither of them should be left in the Dark Lord's hiding place any longer than necessary, and it was never necessary.

Bella slowed her steps, opting for a disarming smile. It wasn't the incarnation of the Imperius that Tom's was, but it was good enough. "Hello Andy."

"Hi. What's up?"

She slid into the seat across from him. "Well..." She made herself imitate an old nervous habit she had of twining her hair and glanced away from him. If she played up some anxiety, he'd try to placate her. It will make him agree to this more readily, she hoped. "You see, I, well, wasn't paying all that much attention in arithmancy yesterday, and I've heard that there is going to be a surprise quiz in class tomorrow."

"Wait, we've got a pop quiz?" He looked horrified. "Are you serious? Vector's gonna give us a pop quiz?"

"That's what I've heard," she supplied. "Please tell me you have some free time right now?"

"You mean free time to cram all this info in my head? Yeah, if I take a Mind Enhancing Potion!"

"Andy, you have to help me! I didn't understand anything yesterday-"



He gestured helplessly, "I don't think I can do anything about it. I'll lend you my notes...?"

Bellatrix made a show of glancing around. "Look, I don't think that we should be talking about this in the open. One of the teachers or their various pets might overhear, and then we'll have a grade deducted for knowing beforehand."

"OK," he agreed. "Let's not talk about it." He shoved his arithmancy text book at her. "Read that. I'll trade you for my notes a.s.a.p."

Bella gingerly took the text book from him, staring at the cover as he frantically dug around for his book bag. She took a breath. "Actually, why don't we just find an empty classroom to study in? We only need the notes and the book. The library doesn't have anything anywhere else doesn't. Madam Pince won't be there to kick us out if you explain things too loudly to me, either."

Andy waved his hand dismissively. "I'll whisper. I don't want that creepy bibliophile any closer to me than you do."

Perfect, Bellatrix inwardly scowled. This is going to require a more forceful approach. "I don't want to take the chance. What if there's something I'll need in the library later on in the week? If she kicks us out, we'll probably be banned for a while."

"I guess. But why do you need my help, anyway?"

"The desire to pass Vector's class isn't enough?" she asked dryly.

"Sure it is," he replied. "But you're great at arithmancy. You've tutored me before. Seriously, Tom's the only one who might actually help you."

Bella decided that this wasn't going to earn a tick in her Improvement List. "He's plowing through his Anti Dark Lord Curriculum. I've given up on him."

This earned her a shocked expression. "Wait, what? You've given up on him?"

Something about his tone made her tread carefully. "Yes?"

"You're kidding."

"...Are you going to help me or not?"

Something suspiciously like understanding dawned in his eyes. "Bella...are you trying to ask me out?"

"Excuse me?" she exclaimed.

"Well you said you've given up on him, and now you're insisting that I meet you in an empty classroom alone, so-"

"I am not trying to ask you out!"

"Are you sure? I mean, I know how lousy you are at making this sort of thing obvious. Just look at To-!"

Before he could finish the sentence, she hauled him up by the scruff of his shirt and hissed, "Andy. If. You. Say. One. Word!"

"Ahh! Ok, ok! Sheesh, woman..."

Satisfied, she released him. "Besides," Bellatrix sniffed, "it's his obliviousness, not my skills at asking boys out. And for the record, if it was you, I'd send you a collection of pathetic pick up lines and write something at the bottom like 'your pick of one above. Do you want to go to' wherever at whatever time? So no, this definitely isn't flirtation."

He eyed her warily. "That sounds weirdly well thought out."

Bellatrix was about to threaten him, when she decided on another option. "Let's just say I've heard someone who might...well."

"Might what?"

"I really shouldn't tell." Bella flashed a teasing grin. Let him think I'll tell him when we get there. Guilt churned in her stomach. Salazar, Tom – is this unsuspecting enough for you?

"Throw me a bone, Bella, my most wonderful and most brilliant friend."

"You forgot 'perfect'."

"That too. I promise I'll act surprised. Really."

She tossed out what she hoped sounded like amused laughter. "You're awful, Andy!" Instructing her movements to radiate a lack of concern, she flicked her wand at the arithmancy book, caught it, and started out of the library.

Andy caught up with her, the bag with his school supplies swinging by his side. "Are you going to tell me?"

"It depends," she drawled, an annoying habit she'd picked up from Lucius. "After all, spreading rumors isn't very classy."

"I'll do your Transfiguration homework for a week, if you're not using it as an excuse to see Tom anymore."

"I don't know...I would be betraying someone's confidence."

"A month?"

"I'm perfectly capable of doing my homework by myself, you know."

"Hm...you drive a hard bargain." They finished heading down the stairs to the third floor and started on the one for the second. "I suppose money isn't an option?"

"I'm a Black, Andy."

He suggested a few more things that she refused, her guilt and trepidation climbing higher and higher the closer they came to their

destination. "I'm surprised," she hedged, "that you haven't wagered the Map yet."

Andy sighed. "I lost it." Bella tried to look surprised. "I know, I know. 'How could you lose something that cool?'"

"That wasn't exactly the wording I was going to use..."

"Eh. You get the point. But to be honest, it..."

"Yes?" she prompted.

He hesitated. "I figure this is all just paranoia, but sometimes, I feel like since I started talking to Saber, things have been different."

"How so?" Heart thumping, she opened the door to the classroom Tom was waiting in and walked through.

He followed, raking a hand through his hair. "Sometimes I feel like there's something I should be remembering, but I don't know what. And with Dumbledore...oh, hi Tom. Didn't see you there." He started to smile, but it faded. Tom was lounging against the wall, arms crossed. An odd, considering expression had washed itself onto his face, and he stared back at Andy, absently fingering his wand in one hand.

A rush of unease flooded Andy's veins. Something about Tom's posture and demeanor made him feel like he would leap out at him at the shortest notice. So he did what he often did in these situations. "Decided to pull a mobster impression on me, did you?" he joked. Tom didn't answer.

Then, suddenly, a perfectly genial smile crossed his lips. "My apologies, Andy," he said, slipping into one of the chairs. "I asked Bella to bring you here."

"Really?" Nervousness whispered to him to make a break for it. Something was wrong. "Don't suppose you're having trouble in Vector's class too, are you?"

“Just as much as always,” Tom returned easily. “I just want to ask you a few questions about the Map, and how you’ve been feeling for the past few months since you had it.”

“...ok?”

“Good. You see, we believe that the Map may be a Dark artifact.”

“You said that when I first showed it to you. It’s fine. Nothing bad has happened.”

This time it was Bella who asked, “Are you certain? You were just telling me otherwise.” She sat down next to him, deciding that if they were all sitting, it wouldn’t feel as worrisome to him.

It didn’t work. He glanced between Tom and her. “What’s going on?”

“Like I said,” the Head Boy answered, “we believe that the Map is a Dark artifact. If there is anything you can tell us, we might be able to find out what it is.”

“And then what?” he demanded. “Are you going to destroy it?”

Tom noted the protectiveness lathered over the words. “Can you think of another solution?”

“Yeah – forget about this whole thing. Saber’s cool. He isn’t a Dark artifact. He’s just too honest.” The humorless smile that wormed itself onto Tom’s lips caused him to tense.

“Of course,” he almost whispered. “‘Saber’ was known for winning friends and allies that way. His honesty. His trustworthiness. His ability to inspire loyalty.”

He couldn’t blame anyone for trusting him. The horcrux was a part of Hadrian, who, in turn, was a part of Harry. Harry was a breath of fresh air. For so many other people, Tom couldn’t help but partially doubt them or know that if a time came that tested their friendship, they wouldn’t pass.

With Harry, a person could always tell where he stood. He supported people not because of ulterior motives, but because he believed in them. He didn't crumble under pressure. He didn't like or want to 'collect' on the time he'd invested in his friends. He had too much of a conscience. Too much nobility.

It made Tom wonder how the horcrux had gone against all those traits...but Harry and he were different people. Nurture had made certain. Or did it not intend to complete the process? It must have had plenty of times before to gain a body. Why now?

"What makes you say that?" Andy's eyes narrowed. "Wait, I didn't lose the Map at all! You took it, didn't you?" Wordlessly, Tom drew out the pilfered object. "Why did – how did – give it back!"

"I'm afraid that I can't do that, Andy. I know for a fact that this seemingly innocuous piece of parchment has been the cause for your memory loss and odd behavior." Andy froze. "I see you realize what I'm saying is true."

"Look," he sounded almost desperate, "Saber is a good guy. He wouldn't do something like this! It's just bad timing, that's all. I know he's just paper with a personality, but he's...he's more than that. Just give him back."

Bella met Tom's suddenly steely gaze. The more he spoke, the more he confirmed their suspicions. Chains were strewn across the wall. She Summoned them to her side. "I'm sorry," she told him and they snaked across his chest and bound him to the chair.

"Hey! What are you doing?"

Tom stood, locking the door, throwing up silencing spells and charming the chains. Andy struggled. "I suggest that you don't do that. They are now Unbreakable. Not even 'Saber' will be able to break them."

"What the Hell are you two doing?" Andy yelled.

"I'm going to place the Map in your hands," Tom's voice was calm and deliberate. Andy didn't move. "Didn't you want it? I am offering it to you."

"Why the sudden change of heart? You did something to it!"

"We haven't," a more composed Bellatrix assured. "Please. Just take the Map. It will be over in a minute."

"What will be over in a minute?" He jerked at his bindings. "Let me go!"

"We're wasting time." He couldn't delay; he might lose his resolve. Tom shoved the Map in Andy's hands, forcing his fingers around it and ignoring his refusals. As soon as his hands closed around the Map, Andy stopped thrashing. Tom immediately backed up, not wanting to become a victim of Hadrian's unnatural strength.

Andy's eyes clouded before clearing. His posture relaxed and his head was now held higher. An eyebrow rose. "Look what we have here," he chuckled. "Riddle and Wonder Woman." His eyes traveled down to the chains and, contradicting the expected response, his smile widened. "What a poor host you are, Riddle. You should be ashamed of yourself."

Tom's grip on his wand tightened. The horcrux was active and wasn't even bothering to play games anymore. They wouldn't have to waste any time dancing around then. "Forgive me for not meeting your standards. I'm a bit out of practice with entertaining Dark Lords."

The horcrux gave a careless shrug that had Tom automatically thinking of Harry. "What can I say? I drop in on people a lot. Surprised to see me?"

"Quite," Tom bit out. "You do realize what this means, don't you?" The horcrux just continued giving him that unnerving smile. Tom decided to move closer, knowing that an invasion of personal space was supposed to make a suspect in crimes uncomfortable, which in turn would make them more susceptible to blurting out information.

He leaned forward and informed him, "Dumbledore will want to have you destroyed at once."

"'Dumbledore', hmm? You're not including yourself in that statement?" He laughed. "Are you seriously playing Good Cop, Bad Cop with me, Riddle?"

Tom ignored him. Interrogation wasn't exactly his area of expertise. He'd heard of the basics: invoke insecurity, present contrasts, make the subject uncomfortable, cast confession as a means of escape, and make the subject feel powerless.

"I don't deny that it isn't tempting, but you aren't Hadrian. You may be the same soul, but based on the fact that Creevy was killed in your seventh year and your personality, I would say that you were created when Hadrian was still in Hogwarts. You didn't do any of his crimes. You still have a chance for redemption." It seemed as if he was going to make a sarcastic comment, so Tom interrupted, "Tell me where Lucius is."

"In a safe place. Somewhere you won't get him."

"Lucius is innocent. You don't want to be the cause of an innocent person's suffering, do you?"

'Andy' glared. "The Malfoy prick isn't innocent!"

Anger, possibly over morality? Tom could work with this. "How does being born into a family you hate cause guilt? Isn't that the same logic that has several pureblood families hating Muggleborns?"

"He fought my Death Eaters with you in the Department of Mysteries."

"To protect his friend. Surely you can't see anything wrong with wanting to protect one's friend?"

"He hurt my friends. He's guilty."

"He wouldn't have even been there if you hadn't attacked my guardian."



Horcrux snapped, "Try and twist this all you like, Slytherin. I'm not telling you where that prat is."

"Then what about Harry?"

"What about Harry?"

"You would leave him to Hadrian's tender mercies?"

The horcrux scoffed. "Hadrian isn't going to hurt him. On the contrary, he's going to give him whatever he wants."

"Harry won't agree with him. With you."

The soul fragment disagreed. "He'll come around. Why wouldn't he?"

"Oh, I don't know," Bella cut in scathingly, "maybe genocide isn't so appealing to him?"

Tom gave her a look and she managed to leash on her temper. This wasn't working. These interrogation techniques were effective when the suspect felt guilty of a crime, not when they felt justified. Besides, everyone in the room already knew that the horcrux was culpable for letting Death Eaters into Hogwarts and being a piece of the Dark Lord's soul. They didn't need him to confess to the obvious.

It was time to move onto threats. "I know quite a bit about horcruxes."

"Tried making one yourself, did you?"

"If a horcrux is destroyed, the soul in it is as well." Frustrated at the lack of apprehension he received in response, Tom stated, "If you don't talk, there is no reason for you to exist."

"You say that," the soul fragment rolled Andy's eyes, "like it's a big revelation that you're going to try and kill me."

"Not try. Do. I will kill you. Speak, and that consequence can be avoided."

He cocked his head to the side. "Do you honestly think I believe that?"

"Imagine this scenario: we lock you up, Hadrian is destroyed, we give you the body of an Azkaban prisoner or whatnot to desiccate, and your memory is erased. You can start over. It's better than eradication, is it not?"

The horcrux sneered. "Kill me."

Tom jerked.

"You heard me. Kill me. I said it. Go ahead. I'm waiting."

"I don't think," Tom said in a dangerously soft tone, "that you realize the full impact of what you are saying."

"Still waiting. Go on. You know you want to. I'm responsible for Pretty Boy's capture, aren't I? It's my fault that he'll be tortured, driven to insanity, killed...use your imagination."

Tom's blood boiled. How dare this creature speak so casually of Lucius' imprisonment? Did he have no sense of – no, he couldn't let himself become angry. He had to remain objective.

If he didn't have so much bravado, this would be easier. He would be far more susceptible to emotional manipulation. But no matter...no one can be this calm about their possible demise. Death is...it is frightening. It was his worst fear. He couldn't imagine the horcrux just accepting it. Surely he was just bluffing.

He stared into Andy's eyes and began to filter through his thoughts using legilimency. Arithmancy. The worry of what a pop quiz Bella had told him about would do to his grade. How he hoped that there'd be some pumpkin pie at dinner.

Nothing at all about Hadrian or any of the thoughts expected of the horcrux. It was purely Andy's thoughts...and that was an area he didn't want to touch.

“Are you done yet?”

Tom pulled out. Why wasn't working? Was it because legitimacy required the person whose thoughts he was shifting through to have a mind, which would in turn necessitated a physical body?

“Morsus.” The horcrux hissed as what felt like an amplified bee sting stabbed into his hand. “Tell me the location of the headquarters.”

He received laughter in response. “What makes you think that I know?”

‘Know’. There was no scorn in the response like he would have expected from a taunt. It was simply a question.

Fidelus? The answer seemed to indicate a yes. “Morsus.” At the corner of his eye, he saw Bellatrix's jaw clench. However, she knew that saying anything after just two spells would undermine everything, so she kept silent. “Speak.”

“You're wasting your time,” he spat.

“Alapa.” He was slapped hard enough that his head snapped to the side and tears nipped his eyes. The quick healing kicked in. Redness dissolved to a mild pink before disappearing all together. The horcrux only glared. This time, Tom shot a spell at him that, if he hadn't been prepared, would have had him screaming.

Sweat burst onto Andy's forehead; his eyelids were stamped shut and his teeth were clamped together. Tom canceled the curse. Horcrux heaved in lungfuls of air, face hidden by a now slick fringe of hair.

“Now that the reality of the situation has become more real to you-” Full blown laughter drenched with notes of amusement and cynicism cut through the beginnings of his next order.

Horcrux sneered up at him as he righted himself. "You think you can scare me with your stupid scare tactics? I've had a Hell of a lot worse than a bunch of school kids!"

Fury ignited inside Tom's chest. Lucius could be dying right now and there was nothing he could do about it. All those years of friendship and he couldn't even get one sentence out of the one responsible – "You will talk!"

He wasn't going to stand feeling like this. So – so helpless! The least he was going to do was wipe that despicable sneer of this face –

"Anct-"

"Tom!" Bella seized his wrist, knocking it to the side. A violently yellow curse blasted the wall and she cast Severus' muffliato around them.

He whirled on her. "What are you doing? He'll break-"

"You are not using a Strangulation Curse on him!"

"It is necessary!"

"He's not going to talk, Tom. You can see it in his eyes."

"He will talk," he ground out. "A few seconds under that rather uncomfortable curse and he'll spill everything."

"Don't delude yourself." Her eyes narrowed. "You asked me to keep you from crossing the line. I want to find him as much as you do, but there's no point in doing this. You'll just be hurting Andy."

"It's nothing that he can't recover from after a short visit to the Hospital Wing."

"Don't think that I don't see where this is heading! Dark curses are difficult to heal, and I won't let you use them on Andy, horcrux or not. You're being a hypocrite! You wouldn't let me use Dark curses, but you can? I don't think so!"

“That,” he almost snarled, “is different! This is my duty – my burden to bear! If anyone has to dirty their hands, it will be me. No one else needs to be dragged into this.”

“Your babying is insulting,” she said coldly.

“We can talk about this later.” He turned back to Andy, cancelling the spell she’d cast. Bellatrix grabbed his arm, a silent warning in her eyes. Tom gave a sharp nod and pointed his wand back at the boy chained up in front of him.

“I really wouldn’t do that if I were you,” Horcrux told them. “You’ll regret it.”

Tom’s lip curled. “I highly doubt that.”

“I’m dead serious. You. Don’t. Want. To.” There was a slight flicker of hesitation in the horcrux’s eyes that Tom seized on (1).

“Like I said, I highly doubt that. Doloris.” Andy screamed. Bella and Tom were taken back for a moment. He had had so much control before...

It doesn’t matter. This is good. He’ll talk now –

“Tom, stop!” Bellatrix cried.

“Just a moment-”

“No, you don’t understand – that’s not the horcrux!”

What?

A string of swear words assaulted his mind. Tom broke off the spell.

Andy shuddered, his posture now less confident and with a face empty of Hadrian’s piercing determination.

What had he done?

"Andy..." Tom's voice was faint and he unconsciously reached out a hand. Pain-filled eyes stared up at him, hurt, betrayal, and anger burning him all at once. Bella was already gripping Andy's shoulder, asking him if he was alright.

Tom opened his mouth, not knowing what would come out, when suddenly, Andy's expression snapped back to one of sharp resolution, mirth wreathing inside. Grinning cruelly, he said, "I told you that you wouldn't like it. Should have listened." He shrugged off Bella's arm, though it wasn't needed, since she had already yanked her hand away the moment his demeanor had altered. "Get your paws off me, inbreed!"

"Gladly, Grindelwald!"

Tom, horror still swimming through him, became vaguely aware of the fact that the horcrux would indeed sacrifice himself. He wasn't bluffing when he told Tom to kill him. Yes, he thought, drafting what he knew about Harry on top of the horcrux's declarations. Neither he or Harry would sacrifice a friend, but if it was himself, he was willing. And it wasn't as if they didn't have a 'friend' at the ready.

Tom said, "We're taking you to Dumbledore. Unless, of course, you don't have the spine to face him."

"Are you calling me a coward?"

"Perhaps I am."

"Ha," came the jeer. "I'll go, but not because your attempt to pick my pride worked. I want to laugh in Dumbledore's face when he tries to make me 'see the light'."

Forcing himself to ignore the taunt, Tom cast *perfectus totalis* on him, unwilling to let even the chance of the horcrux making a run for it when they had to adjust the chains exist. He hauled Andy up onto his feet and swirled the Unbreakable fetters around him again before dispersing the spell.

Bellatrix jabbed her wand against Andy's neck. "Let's go."

A scowling Bellatrix, a seemingly amused horcrux, and a stone-faced Tom strode up towards the headmaster's office, giving up on any belief that either party would get what they wanted.

They had dragged Andy into a classroom. They had used pain spells on him. And for what? They hadn't gained anything from it. They hadn't learned a thing, except that they might have lost a friend.

But...at least Tom had stopped when he knew it was pointless. Other people would have gone on no matter what, especially since, as proved by the effort to use legilimency, veritaserum would be ineffective.

The knowledge didn't make him feel any better.

"Blood pops," Tom spoke to the gargoyle, which leapt aside. The horcrux started humming. Tom squashed the urge to curse him and from Bella's twitch, knew she had the same one. This is just for show, he told himself. He's pretending to not care to throw us off. Or just be plain infuriating. Given his impression of Harry, he figured the latter was the case.

The three traveled to Dumbledore's office and Tom opened the door without waiting for the typical 'come in' the headmaster liked to unnerve his students with. Dumbledore sat behind his desk as the trio, or quartet, depending on how you looked at it, entered. Taking in the variety of expressions on the faces, he chose to wait.

He didn't have to stay silent for long. "Why, hello Dumbledore," the horcrux greeted brightly, a sneer curling his lips. "Hope the paperwork hasn't been too awful. I've heard that the Ministry is really cracking down on you to aid in the war effort. Shame, isn't it?"

"Shut up," Bellatrix ordered, shoving him into the chair in front of the headmaster's desk.

"Language, Miss Black."

"Yes, Miss Black," Horcrux jeered at over his shoulder. "Language."

"Tom," Dumbledore began, "I trust you have a reason for bringing Mr. Dolohov here?"

"I do sir." He pointed to the Map still in Andy's hands. "I won't beat around the bush. I have verified that this parchment is one of Hadrian's horcruxes."

Dumbledore's brows raised, but otherwise he gave no outer hint of his shock. Horcrux smirked. "Your lackey is right, old man. Surprise! Think of it as an early Christmas present."

Dumbledore watched him for a moment, taking in the changes and reaching out his magic to sense the Darkness swamping the Map. There was no doubt; Tom was correct. "I see." He half-heartedly congratulated himself for adapting to this new development so quickly. "May I call you Mr. Potter?" The horcrux caused Andy's body to give a careless shrug. "Excellent. Miss Black, Tom; please sit down."

With a swish of his wand, two more chairs came into existence. The Slytherins reluctantly occupied them, loathing the thought of sitting at the same table as the Dark Lord's soul fragment instead of training their wands on him.

"Mr. Potter, I am curious: how did you manage to possess Mr. Dolohov?" Dumbledore inquired as if he had conversations with body snatching soul pieces every day. "I am assuming that that is the method you have chosen?"

Horcrux obliged rather proudly. "I've been spying in this castle for years, but I never actually possessed anyone until Harry appeared." Tom twitched. "Naturally, he was intriguing, and I wanted to find out what his story was. Sadly, I don't have any rats in Slytherin, so I decided to create my own." He smiled. "When I'm inside the Map, I can sense peoples' presences. I memorized the feel of the Slytherins that often received detention. Dolohov was at the top of the list. I arranged for Filch to confiscate the Map. As predicted, he earned one, and I started talking to him. He was hooked ever since."



Dumbledore nodded. "I must commend you. Hadrian has had a spy in our ranks the entire time. One that changes without he or she even being aware of it. Ingenious."

"Why, thank you. I thought so myself."

"I'm afraid that I cannot allow you to continue."

Andy's body moved forward and he locked eyes with the headmaster. "I am willing to die for the cause. For Hadrian. You're not getting anything out of me. If you're going to kill me, get on with it."

Tom was astounded by the incredible seriousness in which he said it. The full impact of what it said crashed down on him: he truly was willing to lay down his life.

Unwillingly, a sliver of admiration rose inside Tom. He couldn't help but wish that he had the courage to do the same. If the situation as reversed, he wasn't sure what he would do.

"If you come clean," Dumbledore was saying, "that won't be necessary." However, he already seemed resigned to accepting the horcrux's proclamation.

A grim smile spread across Andy's lips. "You know, headmaster, I subscribe to this saying: 'the only ones who should kill are those who are prepared to be killed'."

Slowly, Dumbledore nodded. "I did not expect differently."

"Headmaster," Tom cut in, "surely there are ways of getting information out of this...being? Lucius is gone, and Harry...he might..." He might change allegiances.

Horcrux guessed what he was thinking. "You're worried that he'll turn!"

"Harry won't 'turn'. There is nothing to worry about."

"Oh, but he will," it laughed. "You've treated him like dirt. Muggles have treated him like dirt. Purebloods have treated him like dirt. The Death Eaters are our family and Harry will be part of it. He'll never have to put up with that rubbish ever again!"

Tom glared, unsure of why the words were having such an effect on him but deciding to indulge their effect. "Harry won't fall for your manipulations! He isn't so deluded to actually believe that you're doing this for-"

The mocking laughter seared his ears. "Riddle! I think you've become attached to him! And how ironic is that? From what Dolohov told me, you've been trying everything you can to keep him miserable. What happened? Did you find a noble, trustworthy Gryffindor companion preferable to a Slytherin one?" He smirked. "You must have, since you knowingly befriended 'the Dark Lord'!"

Tom couldn't help but flinch. It was true. He wasn't just worried that Harry would turn his back on him because he feared for the tide of the war. He was worried because he had become fond of the Gryffindor. He was worried for him.

But he wasn't going to let the horcrux know that he was correct. "Keep on laughing, you filthy piece of festering scum-!"

"Tom!" Dumbledore stood from his desk. The Boy Who Lived ordered himself to still. Wordlessly, the headmaster admonished: control yourself. A faint flush burned his cheeks, and he swiftly composed himself. He shouldn't have insulted him so strongly. Now it knew it was right.

Horcrux gazed at the largest clock behind the desk and grinned.

Seeing this, Dumbledore asked, "Is something the matter, Mr. Potter?"

"For you, definitely." He blew a dash of Andy's hair from his face and told him, "In a matter of minutes, the Order's going to have their hands full. That is, if you even get there on time."

No one spoke for a moment as they processed what that meant. Quietly, Dumbledore informed him, "Until we find a safe way to destroy you, Mr. Dolohov will have to be kept in a place where we can watch him. You will be kept in my desk."

"See if I care."

"Professor, if I may," Tom interjected, "I propose that we keep him in the Hospital Wing. We could either invent a contagious illness as a reason to why he can't leave, or we can..." He faltered. "...infect him with one. Dragon Pox, for instance. It will be more merciful that way. He doesn't need to be in fear of the parasite inside him. He won't have to fear himself."

If the headmaster was disturbed by the idea that Tom had given him, he hid it well.

"Utterly ruthless," Horcrux mused cruelly. "You'll deny it, Riddle, but maybe you and my counterpart are more alike than you care to admit! But then again, Slytherin and Gryffindor aren't nearly as different as they claim. When it comes down to it, both of them are willing to do whatever is necessary, though our motives are sometimes different."

"I am nothing like you." Ah, what comforting lies...

"Your suggestion has validity, Tom," came Dumbledore's wearily agreement, forestalling a verbal sparring match. A jet of crimson escaped from his wand and hit Andy in the head. "Please escort him to the Hospital Wing."

Hadrian smiled in triumph as he peered at the building replica in front of him. The support beams and floors were all visible, the architecture matching the actual structure he had in mind. "Impressive, isn't it? So much destruction can be caused by simply plucking," he removed a line of beams, "these supports." The top half of the building that had been resting on the beams teetered to the side. Unfortunately, the angle it was suddenly on and its weight caused it to snap off and tumble to the floor.

The pieces scattered. The griffin in the corner walked over and nudged the fallen pieces before stretching luxuriously and exiting the room.

Hermione commented, "It's symbolic, I think. Cut off the Ministry's supports and everything above comes crashing down. But for End Game, there are other ways to go about it...if Harry succeeds in nabbing Yaxley, we'll have the high up official we need. We can use the alternative method to destroy the Ministry."

"The alternative method isn't as flashy. I like making a statement."

"Only you would call it dull, Hadrian. There are too many things that could go wrong with using architecture. Let's use Yaxley."

"Yaxley. Perhaps. It does get the job done and the Statue of Secrecy will be shattered, not to mention..." He tilted his head to the side, listening to the footsteps approaching. They were light, slightly hesitant, yet determined.

Harry. What looked like a creature that had been dragged through the mud, mugged, and then had taken up that bizarre Muggle fashion of wearing ripped clothes approached. "What happened to you?"

Harry quickly dusted off the dust on his shoulders. "Um, practice was a bit...untamed."

"Ron has been telling me that you've been reckless."

"Yeah, well," Harry retorted with a scowl before he remembered who he was talking to. Hadrian had been keeping away from him for long enough that he was able to come to terms with having a Dark Lord counterpart without being overwhelmed by the evidence. It certainly helped, but Harry wasn't exactly surprised that Hadrian knew how to best deal with...himself.

Despite that, it was still eerie. He hadn't come to agree with the reasoning they were giving him when he challenged their ways of thinking. His uncertainty had dimmed but had no means disappeared. The fact that they were actually being nice to him was as

disconcerting as it was nice. Everyone at headquarters treated him more like a guest and the small arrangements that Hadrian had made for Harry made him aware of the fact that this behavior extended to the Dark Lord as well. It made him feel a guilty when he considered ways to abuse this trust...or manipulations. He wasn't sure which one it was.

Because of that, he didn't know how he should present himself. Harry wasn't the type of person who would pretend to be content if he wasn't. He generally conveyed whatever he was feeling. Perhaps if he had been Sorted into Slytherin in his first year he could have grown more accustomed to it, but as it was, he didn't have the gull to construct such a façade.

Harry cleared his throat. "I'm faster than most people. I can go for the gold when they can't."

"In other words," Hermione muttered, fully aware of the fact that both of them could hear her, "he's just like you."

"But unlike me," the Dark Lord returned, "I am a martial arts expert."

Hermione shook her head in dismay. "How is training for you, Harry?"

"Er, it's going well. I guess. The simulations are really good."

"Sorry to pull you of there like this, but we don't want anyone to think that you're getting personalized attention from us, even if you are. It disrupts unity."

Harry shrugged. "That's fine." He paused, glancing between the two of them, his eyes settling briefly on the partially destroyed building replica. What's that even here for? He decided not to ask.

Instead he queried, "What did you want to talk to me about?" Hadrian moved towards him and he tensed. No matter how much he thought he was used to the idea, seeing 'himself' brought back a host of unsettlement, especially when he added the unusually smooth movements to the equation.

"Punch me."

Harry blinked. "What?"

"Well," Hadrian amended, "don't punch me, per se. I just want to see what your form looks like. I had a chance to observe you a few times. You have strength, control, and instinct. On the other hand, you're missing technique. If you want to reach your full potential, you need it."

Unsure for only a second, Harry punched, landing a few inches from the Dark Lord's nose. Hadrian inspected his fist and adjusted it. "Try to keep your knuckles as parallel to your wrist as you can. That reduces damage to yourself." Harry made a mental note of it. "Also, when you punch, it ideally has to come from your hip. Make a fist and begin the punch palm up, twisting it around as you deliver the blow. That will give it more power."

Giving it a try, Harry placed his clenched fist upside down at his hip and punched, spinning it to the regular position as he extended his arm. It did feel stronger. He repeated the motion a few times, memorizing the feel of it.

"Now when you block, bring your forearms up to the side of your chest and cross them in front of you." Harry did what he was told and Hadrian reached forward and turned the forearm closer to him around. "You will block with this one. Have the palm facing you so you can twist it as you block."

"For the same reason as the last?"

"Yes. The twisting motion adds momentum. It's also the reason why many fighters use a spin in their kicks. When you bring your forearm across to stop a blow..." Hearing the wordless implication, Harry mimicked the move. "...it's stronger. Blocks may be defensive, but they can still hurt if you do them properly. Remember to put your entire body in the motion."

Nodding, Harry repeated the action The first three times it felt forced, but once he'd reached ten, it felt natural, right, as if he'd been practicing for months.

"Good work Harry. Now-" Without warning, Hadrian's fist flew towards his chest. Harry didn't think. Automatically falling back into a ready stance, his forearms crossed and twisted, the inner one hurling across his chest and knocking Hadrian's arm away.

It was perfectly executed. He stared.

"Like I said, good work." Hadrian smiled.

"But," Harry wondered, "I've only been learning it for a few minutes! I should have fallen back into my old habits, if I managed to stop it at all!"

"Campeadori have excellent muscle memory. We can learn in hours what others would take months, sometimes years, to do. That isn't to say you shouldn't practice. Like anything, it needs reinforcement or the skill becomes rusty."

Harry was still startled but he managed to shake it off. "Is there anything else I should know about being a...campeador?"

"Just that an extra dose of adrenaline might cause power spikes. You haven't grown fully into the ability. At first, controlling it will be hard."

Inwardly, Harry had to concur. He'd damaged his share of objects when he'd been furious or panicky. Gradually, he raised his head. "Why are you doing this?"

He received an arched eyebrow in response. "I want you to do well." At Harry's expression, he asked him quietly, "You've never had someone want you to do well, have you?" There was no need for the boy to answer. A silent understanding passed between them before it was abruptly broken.

"Hadrian!" Ron called out, walking briskly into the room. "Are you done with him yet? Lambda has to leave in five minutes!"

"Yes." He turned to Harry. "We'll continue this some other time. In the meanwhile, do credit to yourself." The ironic smile told Harry that both meanings were intended.

Dread churned in his stomach. Harry pasted on a smile before following Ron out, heart beating against his rib cage.

He was actually going to do this. He was going to attack a government building. He was going to take up the mantle of 'Death Eater'.

You're doing this to protect yourself and Lucius. Both of you should be able to live well until help arrives...or you get yourselves out.

How was the Malfoy heir fairing? A part of Harry was amused that he was worrying about it, given the Lucius Malfoy in his world. But they weren't the same, and the relation had stopped being significant to him months ago.

When it seemed acceptable, he had tried to express his concern for him, hoping he was subtle enough about it so as to not jeopardize his own position. From Ron's disgruntlement, he judged that he was reluctantly taking what Harry said into account, but Harry couldn't be sure. His Ron hadn't exactly been the most perceptive person.

"Scourgify," Harry cast on his robes and self. The pristine Death Eater robes came back into view, and Harry jammed on the golden mask as he passed into the reception room where Lambda squad was waiting. Its mystic had long since died. Now, it soothed him knowing that no one knew that it was him that was training with the Death Eaters. It was almost as if no one was there to watch him commit the crime he felt that was.

The other nameless figures had cleaned up any results from the simulation they run through just a few minutes before and were standing in clean rows in numerical order. Harry, as Lambda 21, jogged to the end of the formation where Teddy and Hugo were standing at attention.



“Transfigure your robes to this color,” Ron instructed without preamble, holding up what Harry was certain was a crimson Auror robe. He knew from the simulations that they were going to impersonate the Ministry’s law enforcers.

Robes around him melded into red and everyone jerked their hoods up to obscure the masks over their faces. Of course, that wasn’t going to work completely, which was one of the reasons that they were doing the next rather complicated move.

Ron barked, “Notice-Me-Not-Charms.”

This was the part that they had been practicing the most. With everyone casting the Charm on themselves, which they would take off once they arrived at their destination, they would avoid the notice of Muggles and Ministry officials even if they were in plain sight.

However, the down side to that was that they would not ‘notice’ the rest of their squad. They would probably often bump into each other and wouldn’t be able to interact, but as long as they continued to proceed to the bathrooms where the entrances were, they would be fine. They just had to ignore the doubts that told them that they were going at it alone until the spells were taken off.

With the portkeys reprogrammed to deposit them in Lancaster, the group just had to wait until Ron shot sparks into the air, the signal.

Gold and red erupted above them. Harry sucked in a breath and muttered, “Lancaster” to his portkey. The familiar jerk in his navel signaled that it was working. The next moment, he was stumbling forward in a relatively clean alley. Harry could feel himself stagger into whoever was his left, Teddy, in this case, but the spell made it impossible for him to actually see him. Perhaps if he concentrated extremely hard, he would notice a red blur, but Harry decided not to test the theory. He had a Microsoft building to break into.

Sweat broke across his skin, and Harry comforted himself with the knowledge that he had twenty one other people backing him up.

Wait. With a start, he realized that the psychology about training everyone together was working. He might not be chummy with anyone of the masked figures, but he still felt a strange sense of comfort knowing that they were around and were trained to work with him.

It had only been three days, but even so, they had been forced to depend on each other during training, and Harry hadn't been let down. It was relaxing to know that he didn't have to take care of everything himself; someone else would be looking out for that. Someone else had his back. He didn't have to have a 'me, myself, and I' mentality.

Harry exited the alley, recognizing the path and the familiar entrance way from the simulation. Since they were automatic Muggle doors, they parted as the squad approached. Harry passed through, tugging his hood down again. Much like the ones used by the Unspeakables, the hoods had Obscuring Charms on them to hide the faces they covered, but Harry still couldn't shake the worry that the security cameras would catch them.

No one bothered the group. No one made eye contact. It was obvious that the spells were working perfectly. Though Harry couldn't see them, he could hear the Death Eaters spread out. The Notice-Me-Not-Charms might have made it that he didn't notice people, but that didn't mean he couldn't listen for the sounds they were making. The ones assigned to provide cover shifted to the edge of the formation while fireteams assigned offense took out their wands.

Harry, his holly wand in his hand, walked up the stairs to the bathrooms. He entered the men's, stepping aside to let the Muggle man exiting leave unobstructed.

Crinkling his nose at the sour smell, he stood in line. There weren't a lot of Muggles waiting around for a cubicle, so Harry was reasonably sure that after he counted twenty one noises of the doors opening and twenty one shutting, it would be his turn to nab a cubicle. Once each Death Eater closed a door and said the password, they were transported underground; the cubicle floor descended like an elevator.

He kept track of the direction the exaggerated clangs the Death Eater's made where in. The simulations had given him enough practice that he could discern the specific cubicle no matter how close they were to each other.

Forty two clangs later, Harry's eyes dropped on the farthest cubicle on the right, where the last sound had come from. A nearby Muggle yanked open a different cubicle nearest him, hurrying inside. Harry counted five seconds and headed to the far right one. He tested the lock and the door freely swung open.

Go on, he nudged himself. You've already committed to this. It was his job to cast a brief lumos as soon as he arrived to alert everyone that he, the last one, had arrived. They're waiting. You know what battle is like: you can't be indecisive or you'll get yourself and others killed. You have to put your qualms aside for later. Today...now...just fight.

Air cutting coarse paths through his throat as he breathed, Harry opened the door and muttered the password that the Death Eater intelligence had discovered several weeks ago. He slid to the balls of his feet, adrenaline protesting the confined space and demanding that he take some defensive measure. He hated being closed in. He wanted to move.

The floor began to lower and the bathroom slowly vanished. As he descended, the slightly dimmer lights of the Lancaster Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures spilled over him. Harry immediately scanned the area, though since he'd seen it so many times by now, it was more out of instinct than anything else.

The cubicles emptied into a short cramped hallway that poured into an open foyer. The security desk, two aurors standing idly nearby it, was situated just before the foyer began. Anyone who wanted to go in had to check in first.

Wizards and witches bustled about, shoving papers under coworkers' noses or scampering between offices imbedded in the foyer's walls. A dome, which Harry personally thought was rather pointless

considering that they were underground, stretched over it, causing the impatient conversations to echo around him.

He was about to disregard his inspection of the crowd when he spotted an annoyingly familiar witch in blindingly red robes, disgustingly fake dyed hair, and a quill scribbling on parchment at her side. Rita Skeeter, Harry growled. She was here to interview whoever was in charge of the magical creatures that were being moved, according to Teddy. Apparently, today was a special event.

The metamorphagus had hinted that he didn't think it was a coincidence that the day she was there was the day they were attacking. With a member of the Press there, the Ministry's incompetence would be captured in all its bumbling glory.

Brushing off his distaste for the beetle animagus, Harry jumped off the platform and walked towards the end of the hallway leading up to security. He raised his wand and nonverbally shot off a lumos. White light washed over the floor in front of him before evaporating. The paunch bellied, bored wizard droning at people for their wands at the security desk squinted and glared before returning to munching on a pastry.

Harry fell in line and watched the proceedings. Paunch Belly held out his hand as one of the various Ministry officials strutted by. "Wand." Not even bothering to check the name it was registered to as he took it, he waved the official off.

With security like that, Harry remarked flatly, disabling security isn't even necessary.

He watched as Fireteam Two seemingly appeared from out of nowhere and advanced towards Paunch Belly and the two aurors. In the back of his mind, he knew that another fireteam was going to remain under Notice-Me-Not-Charms in the hallway until the end of the mission since they were in charge of keeping the anti-apparation wards up. Everyone else was taking off the spells either just before the attack or in the middle of it.

The man at the desk just held out his hand. The lead Death Eater discretely aimed his wand at him with the other members of the fireteam did the same for the aurors. "Imperio," Harry heard the command. The wizard's hand retreated. He and his former law enforcement officials stood and suddenly made their way towards the shafts that the Death Eaters had just come from.

That was the cue for the fireteam in charge of disabling the Floo to execute their orders. Once the panic from the masses set in, the officials would find themselves unable to escape through the fireplaces. Ron hadn't wanted anyone to leave in case they alerted the Order or otherwise.

Several of the other fireteams would be herding the unfortunates into groups. This was supposed to make it easier for the rest of the Death Eaters to find their targets and keep them out of Lambda's way as they searched.

Ron, his hood still down and now noticeable, plus the fireteam that had just disabled the first security measure crossed the border into the foyer. Harry held his breath as he waited for the signal. This is it.

He didn't hold it for long. "Leosignare!" the redhead shouted.

A rearing golden lion with brutal garnet eyes and bathed in blood red mist roared into existence just below the peak of the dome.

Every set of eyes snapped up to the sight. There was shocked silence for a heartbeat before the mark's significance registered.

"Death Eaters! Death Eaters!"

"Aahh!"

"Help! Aurors, help!"

The cacophony of screams combined with the canceling of Notice-Me-Not-Charms stabbed Harry's ears. Gritting his teeth, he brandished his wand and hunted for a 19 and 20 inscribed below the lambdas on the Death Eater masks.

Crimson robes rippled back into their trademark black and Harry swiftly weaved towards Teddy and Hugo just as he had practiced. Every non-Death Eater was sprinting away from them or shrieking in horror. The ones that had dived for the cubicle-lifts upon seeing the Dark Mark were effortlessly picked off as they unwittingly charged to the suddenly revealed Death Eaters.

Skeeter, Harry witnessed with momentary grisly satisfaction, was whacking anyone nearby with her handbag in an attempt to flee. However, petty revenge wasn't what he was here to do. He had to capture Vitruvius Yaxley. He had to find his target.

"Death Eaters!" came the hysterical reiteration.

The pandemonium that had paralyzed the Department detonated into full-fledged chaos. A few brave people shot off spells, only to have their resistance soundly trampled; they just didn't have the numbers to put up a valid defense.

Swallowing a torrent of pity and guilt, Harry, Teddy, and Hugo broke into the foyer and swiftly skirted down the left hall connected to it, their Death Eater status earning a wide breadth. "Stupefy!" he heard someone call and an easy flick of his wand repelled the Stunner.

"Stupefy," Teddy intoned, causing a secretary frozen in fear to drop. Books and parchment flew up in the air as her body thudded on the ground. Harry swished them away and sent them crashing into the woman they were rapidly approaching, her furious face a tell-tale sign that she was going to attack. A thick binder of Ministry documents smacked into her forehead with enough force to bowl her over and Harry threw a Stunner, not wanting to risk her getting up and receiving worse treatment from a(nother?) Death Eater.

Alarms began to howl to life. Cursing the close quarters the hallway they were jogging through stuffed them in, Harry Locked all the doors, preventing any bystanders from jumping into the hall where he would be forced to fight them.

“The target,” Teddy reminded, careful not to call Yaxley by name, “should be in his office.”

That, Harry recalled, should be two turns to the right. Right next to the hub of auror activity. Another wail from the alarms had him struggling to ignore the torture to his sensitive hearing. He could barely make out the clatter of footsteps up ahead. “The aurors are coming,” he told them. “I’m estimating we have five seconds.”

Without a word, Teddy and Hugo stepped to either side of him. Back in training, they’d made the decision to keep Harry in the center where he would be the one focusing on whatever problem was directly in front of them. Hugo and Teddy would concentrate on the sides. Given that they’d already taken out anyone who might attack them from behind, all they had to do was wait for the onslaught.

They weren’t disappointed. Six red robed figures bolted out of the doors, skidding to a halt as they spread out around the trio. Not wanting to wait until they were surrounded, Harry shot off a *reducto* into the wall above their heads. The auror closest to the spell didn’t bother blocking it because it clearly overshot him and therefore, at first glance, didn’t think like it would hurt him. It was a costly mistake.

The wall exploded behind the aurors, chunks of debris smashing them in the back of the head or slicing their skin. The three of them had fortified themselves with shields, two against magic and one against physical objects, in preparation. The aurors that hadn’t been knocked out from Harry’s overpowered spell shot off curses. Noticing the shudder of Teddy and Hugo’s ready-to-buckle shields from some of the particularly unfriendly ones, Harry cancelled his shield and applied the same trick on the wall to the floor.

The aurors weren’t going to be defeated by the same tactic again, however, and the spell was deflected. In a strange flash of inspiration, Harry tried to Summon the aurors’ shoes. Summoning spells didn’t come out as a beam of light, so most people wouldn’t see them coming and wouldn’t have shields in place to protect themselves from it. Any auror that had dropped their shield in favor of attacking was going to have an unpleasant surprise.

Unfortunately, so did Harry. Aurors were jerked off their feet but Harry was now left with having to dodge a spray of boots headed to his face. "Duck!" he yelled. That hadn't been the best plan out there.

"Ow!" Hugo scowled, massaging his shoulder as a heel clipped him.

"Sorry."

Harry, Hugo, and Teddy took advantage of the state of a couple of the groaning aurors on the floor to shoot Stunning, Sleeping, and Immobilizing spells. Harry started forward, but Teddy's voice stopped him. "Twenty One," he warned. Biting down a growl of frustration, Harry forced himself to remember that he had to be a soldier here, not a duelist.

He couldn't just break formation without telling anyone. "Stay there." Problem solved.

"What - ? No, don't-!"

Harry was already closing the short distance between himself and the nearest standing auror. A shield tightly wound around him, he threw a front-snap kick into the closest stomach available. As his victim doubled over, Harry snatched the wand out of his hand and shoved him forward to intercept the spell flying in his direction. Too busy to watch the results of said spell, Harry jabbed at the ribs of another and brought his foot across in a crescent across a second's temple.

"Impedimenta!" A man in red robes was tossed over his head. "Stop forcing us to cover you like that!" Hugo yelled.

"You didn't need to; I'm pretty fast." As if to demonstrate, Harry took advantage of his newly acquired wand to hurl two fiery whips around the ankles of the aurors on either side of him. He yanked, hauling them into each other. The resounding collision made him wince. "That's got to hurt..."

Teddy finished off the last one. "Twenty One, you can't just charge in like that."



“Hey, there weren’t a lot of them left and I am the one that’s supposed to do most of the offense. I knew that if you two just kept to your roles as defense, all you would have to do was keep up shields for a couple of seconds. Besides, I made quick work of them.” He wasn’t sure how he felt about that. The challenge of the fight had brought a grin to his face under the mask and the fact that he could win was invigorating. But he was fighting law enforcement officers.

They were just trying to protect the people here.

And so are we, Hermione’s voice answered him.

Then why isn’t this easier? But...he was thinking so much with his emotions. Tom would think with his head. Maybe I need to -

“Nevertheless...”

“Let’s just nab Ya – the target and go.” Hugo kicked an auror out of the way.

Yes. Grab Yaxley and get out of here. You don’t need to spend more time questioning your actions. Do that later.

Harry checked the corridor that first wave of aurors had come through. There were two doors but otherwise it was empty. “Lock the doors,” Harry advised to either of the two behind him. Over the alarm, Harry became aware of less terrified noises from the foyer. It looked like the other fireteams had subdued the workers. If the aurors had attempted to engage the Death Eaters there like they’d expected, they would have to deal with a hostage situation as well.

Things would have gone differently if this hadn’t been just a tiny adjunct of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures in the Ministry of Magic. If they had tried to barge into the main bureau in the Ministry, Harry didn’t doubt that they would have regretted it. Here, there was just a handful more than the amount of Death Eaters. The Lancaster office wasn’t particularly well known or guarded. Until now, there had been no reason for it to be. The particularly dangerous creatures were either quickly sent in transit or weren’t there in the first place.

They made their way down the hall, taking a right. Another fireteam crossed paths with them but didn't make any move to acknowledge them. Harry, Teddy, and Hugo did the same. The area they were approaching was bereft of people, given the fact that the aurors had charged down to the entrance of the Department to engage the other Death Eaters.

"We should take another right here," Teddy told them unnecessarily, given the fact that they'd been through a recreation of the place several times before. However, intelligence ended once they made that next turn. Mid level spies could only gather so much information.

The group slowed as they reached the fork in the road. "Point Me Yaxley," Hugo instructed. Annoyed, Harry tried to Silence the alarm blaring on the ceiling. The spell bounced off. He chose the alternative method and cast a reducto. The inhuman howling stopped.

"He's right ahead. If we don't hurry, he might get to the emergency Floo fireplace nearby."

"I thought someone was supposed to disable that?"

"Nah. That fireteam was assigned disabling the fireplaces behind us. They didn't have time to tamper with the Floo Network; they just got rid of the powder to start up the fireplaces. Technically, we're the ones who are supposed to disable the one ahead. We'll be the first ones there."

Teddy recommended, "We should go. There is only so much curiosity and retrieving of documents to keep him from leaving." He started to turn the corner when a neon red light lanced the space inches from his ear. Teddy jerked back but Harry seized his arm and dragged him across the room, firing curses in the direction he guessed the spell had come from.

Hugo scrambled to follow. "How did they know we were here?"

"Twenty One destroyed an alarm. They must have guessed what the noise reduction meant-"

“Reducto!” Harry vented his frustration. The auror who was shooting at them backed into an office and slammed the door shut. The three waited, but it became apparent that the sudden assault was only there to gain time. He wasn’t coming out to fight again. “Let’s go!”

“Wait,” Hugo grabbed his sleeve, “they’re probably waiting for us! You can’t just go through the door like that!”

Harry paused. He was right. There probably was going to be a mini ambush waiting for them. In any other situation, he would be cheering. Harry could claim indecisiveness until they’d been debating for so long that Yaxley would have escaped.

But he needed to succeed. Forcing himself to think of the Yaxley they were pursuing as the same Yaxley back in his universe, one of Voldemort’s top and most loyal Death Eaters, Harry felt determination burn inside him. “If we aren’t going to use the door, then we’ll just have to make another entrance.” He motioned towards the windows. Just like Muggle offices, these ones had a few within the building. A spell had been cast over the glass for opaqueness, making it hard to guess what was inside.

However, a closed door led to just as much mystery, and he believed that they would expect him to come after them through that conventional way.

“I’m going to get sued for property damage,” Harry muttered under his breath. Rising out of his dueling stance, he said in a louder voice, “We’re going to break the window and go in through there. Hugo, where does Point Me say that the target is?”

“Er...” Hugo performed the spell. “If we go through the window, we should continue going through to the next office.”

Teddy objected, “The glass...”

“Well, unless you can Transfigure it into fudge, yeah, you might have to deal with a few scratches.”

This earned a pause in response. "I might be able to do it..."

"Be my guest."

Brown began to spot the glass. Harry waited for a moment, but Teddy shook his head. "I don't actually know the spell. That was just a guess based on what I know of arithmancy. There isn't going to be much improvement on that."

"Cuts and scrapes it is, then." Harry blasted the window. Glass and the occasional chunks of hardened fudge hurdled outward. He rushed forward and neatly leapt through the window, which was low and shattered enough that avoiding the still-present shards wasn't much of an issue.

No aurors were in this room. He glanced back at Hugo's wand. Left. "Confringo."

This time there were two people inside. Teddy and Hugo threw up shields to cover Harry as he Levitated the desk inside the next room and hurled it at the group inside. One of them ducked, but the other wasn't so lucky.

Where is Yaxley?!

As the fallen auror struggled to his feet, Harry sent an overpowered Summoning Charm for the man's wand and entered the room. The wand was ripped out of his hands and Harry pocketed it. When he looked up, he realized that there were two doors. Which one led in the right direction?

"Where's Yaxley?" he demanded. The auror only glared and Harry felt a flash of irritation. He had to get this guy or everything would be for nothing! Everyone he Stunned, everyone he hurt - he would even have to go through with another mission!

Hugo stepped forward and grabbed the auror by his lapels. "Well? Aren't you going to answer?"

"Hu – Twenty!" Harry hissed.

"I'm not letting this guy muck up our plan! I told dad I'd get a decoration, and I'm going to get one!"

Harry was about to retort when Teddy lifted his wand and destroyed the two alarms. He tried to Summon the rest of them, gritting his teeth in concentration.

"What are you doing?"

"Eliminating these," was the terse response. "Twenty One. Tell me if you can hear. Them."

Harry's eyes widened in surprise. "What makes you think I can do that?"

The sound of Hugo's Stunner, then: "Because you're a bloody campeador, that's why." A creak sounded and another alarm's wail dimmed before dying completely. "Our lord can always tell when someone's a couple rooms around him if he wants to."

"I'm not your lord. I'm not that good yet."

"No," this time it was Teddy who spoke, "but you are currently supposed to have the gifts of the average vampire, and that's at the very least. Listen. Tell us what you hear."

Harry considered protesting, but figured he may as well give it a shot. Feeling a little foolish, he tilted his head to the side and strained his ears. His instincts were telling him to keep moving, that he could waste time standing around Harry ignored them and tried to block out the alarms and tune into any footsteps.

A few seconds passed. The alarms seemed to recede and become unimportant. Then faint noise came to his attention, directed more to the right door. "There!"

Hugo slapped his shoulder. "Told ya!"

Harry shrugged the hand off and wrenched open Door Number One. He continued to listen to the footsteps, letting it guide him forwards. Hugo's Point Me spell agreed with him and Harry felt his magic rising in anticipation of a fight.

Suddenly Teddy cursed. "He's heading to the Department head's office!" He jabbed a finger at a small sign. That was where it was suspected that an emergency Floo fireplace was.

"He's not getting away." Not on my watch. "I'm running ahead." Without waiting for a response, Harry sprinted, disregarding door handles and shooting impedimenta spells on the doors to make them open instead. He hesitated at going the speed he was, worried that he wouldn't have enough energy once he got to Yaxley.

Meeting him out of breath is better than not meeting him at all!

That decided it. Harry dashed forward, leaping over the occasional desk in his way. As he moved, he reflected that Teddy had been right about being as fast as a vampire. His breath came harder, but it wasn't the taxing heaves he had expected.

Let's see how much I can push this. The footsteps were even closer. Harry hurdled across the hall, tossed the Department head office's door out of the way, and immediately cast evanesco on the Floo powder before the room's inhabitation could recover from his unexpected appearance.

The brutal faced man's snarl once he registered the implications of what had just happened made Harry jump. Pure viciousness drenched every syllable. "Death Eater filth!"

Harry flinched. Death Eater. All of a sudden he couldn't help but wonder what would happen to Yaxley when he detained him. Would he be thrown in a cell too? Would he be tortured? Would he –

"Crucio!"

Harry dived backwards into a roll. The Unforgivable ripped any uncertainty out of his mind. Yaxley had just become one of Voldemort's fanatical lackeys. "Deprimo!"

"Crucio!"

"Expelliarmus!"

Yaxley whirled aside and sent back a jet of searing purple flames. Harry Summoned the desk in the corner to protect him and partially regretted it. The wood charred and exploded, cinders grazing Harry's face. "Bollocks!" he hissed. Blindly, he fired off a Disarming spell in Yaxley's general direction as he picked himself off of the floor just in time to avoid whatever blasted where his legs formerly were.

I can't believe you didn't see the results of using a wooden object coming! Jamming his teeth together, he barked, "Furnunculus!"

Yaxley sneered. "Your pathetic schoolboy spells betray you – are you fresh out of Hogwarts or still in it? Ventris expello!"

Harry easily sidestepped it, his temper rising. Yaxley was using Dark Arts on him? Well then... "Accio wall!"

The wall behind Yaxley began to fly forward but he threw himself onto the ground just in time. Yaxley spat, "Accio wall!" and Harry froze for just a moment before spinning around and Banishing the debris before it hit him. Spells shot at his feet, stomach, and head. Harry narrowly escaped being hit, the motions he was using to evade them causing him to lose his footing. He hit the floor rolling, jumped to his feet, and started to spear Yaxley with a Tongue Tying Curse...

...only to find him not longer there. What the heck? The room was empty. Where did he – damn! It seemed that Yaxley had taken the unwitting exit Harry had provided him when he'd Summoned the wall out of the Department head's office. Harry bolted after him and it didn't take more than a few seconds to catch up to the man.

Yaxley turned and roared, “Displosio! Displosio!” His wand slashed down, and Harry swore, recognizing the spell. If that hit anywhere, it would cause an explosion that –

Blazing orange soared by him.

Knowing he’d never be able to block both of them at the same time, Harry did the only thing he could do. He braced himself and ran as quickly as he could –

Everything behind him blasted forward. Harry and Yaxley were catapulted off their feet. He crashed into Yaxley as he launched forward and the two went careening into the floor in a painful tangle of sharp limbs.

“Ahh!” Harry barely registered the fact that something had slashed his arm before he skidded across the floor and hit something. “Merlin...” he gasped, heaving air into his abruptly empty lungs. The waspish sting in his arm told him he had a cut. Not deep, but not shallow either. His head throbbed from the impact.

He forced himself up, fumbling for his wand. Yaxley stumbled onto his hands and knees before pushing himself forward. “Obscuro,” Harry called out and the disoriented Yaxley found himself raking a blindfold off of his face.

Harry flipped back onto his feet, thankful that his wand arm wasn’t the one injured. They were in a medium sized atrium with stairs snaking up its side. Yaxley was trying to escape to the surface.

“Meteoloinx!”

Rainclouds burst into existence above them, water pelting Harry’s head. He squinted, almost tripping when he ran forward. By Morgana, what was the counter jinx to this annoying spell? Growling in frustration, he bellowed, “Incendio!” Not the most effective, but the steam was hot enough that he was satisfied.

“Expulso!”



“Defodio!” The two spells connected, raging against each other for dominance. Harry called up his magic, channeling it into his wand. This all came down to will power, and he wasn’t going to lose. He had forced Voldemort to submit in the graveyard. He wasn’t going to let Yaxley get the best of him!

Red and sickly yellow battled back and forth in the air. A tidal wave of determination rose in Harry, and the red jet of light slid forward. Shockwaves trembled down his arms, forcing him to plant his feet even more firmly on the ground. Yellow pushed forward, but finally, it buckled. Yaxley was blasted backwards as the spell connected with his wand.

Harry almost felt a twinge of pity as it splintered, now completely useless. Yaxley groaned. Slowly, he picked himself off the floor, eyes snapping up as he saw Harry warily approaching. “Stay back, arena fodder!”

“‘Arena fodder’?” Harry rolled his eyes. “Great insult. You must really make those four year olds cry.”

Yaxley thrust his unusable wand at him. “Don’t think I don’t know what you are! Your kind should have died a long time ago! None of your father’s mass murdering rampage would ever have happened!”

Vaguely, Harry realized that he was referring to his campeador status...but father? Oh. Right. “I’m not Hadrian’s son!”

Yaxley flinched at the name. “Shut up scum! The Ministry will have your insane sire butchered like an animal, mark my words!”

Harry glared. He knew that Yaxley wasn’t talking about James Potter, but he couldn’t quite bring himself to care. “Don’t talk about my father that way!”

“Who was your mother, boy? Some desperate, power-hungry-”

“Shut up! Silencio!”

A miss! Yaxley had ran and it wasn't until then that he realized that Yaxley had been using his anger to distract him from noticing that he was edging towards the stairs. The man tore up the steps and Harry mentally slapped himself.

That sneaky – no, focus! What's the spell they use in the dormitory? Oh, yes, that one! "Glisseo!" The stairs flattened and Yaxley came sliding down the suddenly slippery ramp.

"Arrgh!"

He landed on a heap on the floor and Harry barely restrained himself as he stormed towards the fallen man. "Stupef-"

"Crucio! Aaaggh!" Inhuman howls tore through Yaxley's mouth as the broken wand cause the spell to backfire. Harry balked at the sound and immediately knocked Yaxley's wand from his bone-thin arm. Tiny jerks of flayed nerves wracked Yaxley's body. Harry hesitated, unable to stop himself from feeling sorry for him.

"Fool." Harry tensed. Yaxley's features twisted into a despicable mutilation of a face and he opened his mouth.

He'd blame it later on the spirit of déjà vu haunting the area, but Harry told him, "Eat slugs!" A jet of green light flitted out of his wand. He folded his arms. "That'll keep you from insulting my family."

Yaxley sneered, obviously thinking that the spell was ineffective. The next moment he opened his mouth he was proved wrong. He gagged, bewilderment chiseled into his jagged features, and then retched black, white, yellow, and grey slugs all over the atrium floor.

That's...pleasant. Harry could only stare with the same type of fascination a person has when they see a burn victim as the slugs slid across the tiles. Goo pasted itself beneath them. Most were over two inches long and spotted all sorts of colors Harry hadn't known could appear on slugs.

Ugh. There goes my appetite.

Yaxley glared murderously up at him and opened his mouth again, only to be assaulted by another round of slugs. "Locomotor Yaxley." Harry snatched the annihilated wand off the floor and pocketed it, noting to himself that he now had three different wands in a rapidly growing collection. There was no need to Stun or Immobilize Yaxley; the slugs took care of that problem. Yaxley rose a few inches from the floor and Harry levitated him at his side, ignoring the fact that he was vomiting slugs as they walked.

(1) For those of you who are wondering, this is because the horcrux wasn't able to keep himself completely unattached from Andy. He didn't want to hurt him if he could help it, but not at the expense of his/Hadrian's success.

A/N: OK, this is going to be the last time that I respond to reviews in each chapter, though I will write responses to anonymous ones. Like I said in the notes section, I really did not like this chapter. Still, it didn't feel like it was getting better as the days passed and I didn't think you'd appreciate an indefinite delay until that happened...for anyone who does want to critique this, my main questions were:

1. Are the campeador abilities being developed and explained at a good rate?
2. I see interrogation as something Tom would do, but if you could tell me if I presented it well (too much, too little) that would help.
3. Any comments on how Harry interacts with Hugo and Teddy?
4. Did I portray Bella's manipulation of Andy well?
5. Any other thoughts or suggestions?
6. I've put up the poll again; if you've already voted and changed your mind, tell me in a review!

Thanks for reading!

## Chapter Fourteen

Abandoning the still raining atrium, Harry whipped a hand back over his soaking hair, water gelling it out of his face. Cold rivulets poured down his collarbone and threatened to paste his Death Eater robes to his skin.

He let out a sharp outtake of breath that he supposed was meant to be a sigh. Anger pulsed inside him and it took him a moment to digest the fact that it didn't have a clear source. It was ubiquitous; everything over the past three days had been weighing down on him. He had decisions to make that he acknowledged that he had been delaying. He was annoyed that everything had to be so muddled. He was peeved at Hugo for treating the mission as if it were some sort of quidditch game he was a chaser. And of course, he was angry at Yaxley at being one of the reasons why he was here.

His boots squealed, water heaving all over its sides. Grimacing, Harry walked through the gigantic and smoldering hole Yaxley had blown up a while ago. Teddy and Hugo should be coming, he thought and decided to stop. His prisoner convulsed at his side, obviously struggling to withhold an onslaught of slugs. Harry really had to wonder why he had chosen that curse out of the host of ones he knew to cast on the man. It had been satisfying for the first ten seconds, and now he was almost feeling like he may as well have cursed himself.

Averting his eyes when someone belched slugs was harder than it sounded.

Tap, tap, slap, tap, slap! Footsteps – one pair slapping the ground, the other more like a push. Harry knocked a stray wire that had been busted from the wall and stepped into the former Department head's office and current tornado aftermath. Hugo stumbled inside, sweat dappling his brow. Teddy followed, gasping, "Twenty...One..." He sucked in a breath before noticing Harry's cargo. "Is that...the...target?"

Yaxley promptly threw up all over the Hugo's boots.

“Aw, yuck! Gross!” Hugo cried, shaking the unlucky appendage in disgust. “What the bloody Hell was that for?!”

Teddy stepped back, repulsion visible in his eyes. “What did you cast on him?”

“A Slug Vomiting Charm.” Pause. “It was pretty spur of the moment.”

“Well, kill the spell,” Hugo scowled. “I don’t want to get any more slime on my robes!”

“...I can’t.”

“What?”

“I, er, don’t know the counter spell.”

They just stared. Finally, “You performed a spell that you don’t know the counter to on our target?”

“It will wear off in about ten minutes!” Harry defended. It wasn’t as if he wasn’t regretting that decision either...

“...Let’s just keep moving.”

Teddy was polite enough not to shoot him another disbelieving look, though that didn’t hold true for Hugo. Harry, stepping over Yaxley’s newest pile of slimy goodness, walked towards the foyer where the fireteams had been instructed to bring their assigned prey.

It was only after they were walking for a while that he was able to register all the damage they had done to the place. Walls were demolished, in some cases nonexistent. Offices had become an endangered species.

The alarms were giving him a headache.

Abruptly, they shut off. “Thank Merlin,” Harry muttered, ears ringing despite the new quietness. Unfortunately, it was replaced by the sound of miserable Ministry officials. Hugo and Teddy were still

oblivious to the noise, but Harry, though he wasn't nearly as skilled in distinguishing sounds as he would have liked, could make out occasional scuffle and sudden falls. He judged that the Death Eaters were forcing them to kneel. Some of them might have been inspected in case they were one of the targets.

A tremor rattled the ground. Harry paused slightly but then continued, dismissing it.

They passed through the hall where the Aurors had first met them. At the far end, the hostages became visible and Harry noted that his guess was correct. One of the Death Eaters walked around, plucking wands and throwing them into a Bottomless bag. A couple of the people were bound.

A more grisly picture was illuminated as they neared. The bodies of several red robed men and women were shoved to the side of the room towards the entrance facing the security desk. A large portion was bleeding. All were so...motionless.

Are they...they aren't...?

Beside him, Hugo shifted uneasily and voiced the question to Teddy. The response wasn't instant. Then he said, his voice detached, "Wars aren't won with Stunners."

Bile festered in Harry's throat. "They...all of them...they have a family. They're someone's mum. Someone's dad. Someone's brother, sister, cousin...friend."

The metamorphagus murmured, "The same could be said for our injured. Look." He gestured to a lifeless Death Eater crumpled on the floor, someone leaning over him, likely to activate a portkey. "We've lost our share as well."

"But Aurors start out with low key spells. Most of the Death Eater's went straight for the dangerous ones."

"Yes, but they would've-

Yaxley broke in by vomiting again.

Teddy wrinkled his nose. "Put him with Fireteam Six." Fireteam Six was the one in charge of evacuating the prisoners as soon as they were obtained.

Harry started to move forward but halted. Guilt flared in his chest. What was going to happen to these people? When he handed Yaxley over, what was going to happen to him? Of course he was still furious at him for even trying to cast the Cruciatus at him, but Yaxley's nonexistent morals aside, Harry's personal feelings aside...wasn't he just exchanging one life for another? Yaxley's for Lucius'? Who was he to say which one was more important?

Another sickening thought hit him. Logically, since Yaxley seemed to be the current head of the Department of Mysteries, he was the more valuable life. If one of them had to be sacrificed for the...for the Greater Good, it should be Lucius.

Merlin. Harry's fists clenched of their own accord. How did people make choices like this and live with themselves?

Was this what Dumbledore had to do? Play people like chess pieces, loathing himself all the while, knowing that he had to go on doing this because if he didn't, if he wasn't willing to be the manipulator, hundreds more would pay for it?

Was this what Hadrian did as well?

"Twenty One?" Teddy's voice pulled him out of his thoughts.

Harry didn't respond. He wondered what Tom would think of him doing all this. He was far more calm and logical. If it had been Tom captured by Voldemort, Harry was convinced that he would have come to a resolution about all his actions far sooner than Harry was.

Look around, Harry. There aren't any aurors. None that could help you, anyway. You have no choice but to give Yaxley away. And wasn't that just partially his fault too?

“Incarcerous.” Bindings appeared on Yaxley’s ankles and wrists. Harry took a breath and stepped forward to hand the man in his hands off to his possible execution. His right foot echoed slightly as it touched the ground. His awareness of his decision doubled. His left foot fell. It tripled.

An odd cold settled over him. It was as if his heart, burning with conflicting emotions, had suddenly been dosed. The feelings beat coolly inside, dampened and layered with grim resolve. The nearest Fireteam Six member stood in front of him. The coldness rose to beat down the lash of guilt as he stiffly thrust Yaxley at him. The man wretched around to pierce Harry with a look of pure loathing before but Harry had stopped watching midway and began walking back to Teddy and Hugo. A soft whoosh behind him was the only indicator that a portkey had been activated.

Another tremor shook the ground. Harry acknowledged it but otherwise was indifferent. He’d performed the task he was meant to do. With any luck, his work would be judged exceptional enough to earn a decoration. If it did, he hoped that there wouldn’t be any celebration; he didn’t want to be rewarded for sentencing a person to possible death no matter who it was. Sometimes, he conceded, bad things need to be done. That doesn’t mean that they have to be celebrated.

Until Ron and the fireteam he was leading returned, they would all have to wait. That meant that he had time to ponder. He glanced back at the stop where Yaxley had vanished and tried to make sense of what he was doing.

The Death Eaters had charged into the Department, disposed of anyone who might be in their way for one reason or another, and dispatched the aurors. It hadn’t escaped Harry’s notice that in training, Ron hadn’t reminded anyone not to use non-lethal force. Ruthlessness was permitted, though he couldn’t be sure whether it was encouraged or not.

A commander is partially responsible for his subordinates’ actions. He or she has a duty to make sure that they behave. Then again, Stunners and Disarming spells weren’t exactly what one thought of



when someone said the word 'firepower'. They were such basic spells that blocking them was laughably easy.

Why draw out the conflict? he could imagine his Dark counterpart saying. Besides, this is war. Why wouldn't we eliminate enemy soldiers? Stunning them makes them capable of fighting another time and injuring our allies.

And torture? Harry asked himself and was surprised at how easily he could guess Hadrian's answer.

Protecting our own is a higher priority than avoiding moral scruples. If he has information I need, I will take it.

Harry started to argue with himself again when he paused. He was trying to justify things that were possibly not justifiable. After all, necessity does not make something right. And doesn't war fall under that category? It is inherently wrong, but it is a necessary evil. But there must be some morality in war.

His eyes traveled to the fallen Aurors. Excessive force? That might be it. If fighting has to be done, then you have to make sure you've used every feasible method before resorting to it. Things should be done because they have to be, not because you get a kick out of it. Otherwise...you're using war as an excuse.

Crash.

Harry's head whipped around. Another quake ran through the floor, sending vibrations thundering up his still-wet feet. He hadn't heard the noise that had made the shockwave; it had either been too far or he had been too distracted. However, the vibrations wrecking the walls were strong enough that he couldn't ignore them. What's happening?

He swept his gaze around the foyer, realizing that Ron and the fireteam that had gone with him still weren't present. What had been their task anyway? It occurred to him that Ron had announced every other fireteam's job to the squad as a whole...except the one he had taken with him. A chill ran down Harry's spine.

An enormous shudder punctured the building. Harry's hand instinctively darted for his wand. Where was Ron? He highly doubted that mini earthquakes in an underground complex full of dangerous magical creatures could be a positive, and he didn't like the idea of Ron anywhere near the epicenter.

He's not your Ron, a voice in the back of his head reminded him. Uneasily, Harry agreed with it, but even if they were different people, he didn't want anyone to get hurt.

Which is rather hypocritical, don't you think, considering what you did today?

Harry swiped the comment from his mind. Something was stampeding towards them at breakneck speed. He tensed and waited. Whatever it was, it was charging up from the lower levels where the magical creatures in transit were kept.

Wait – it's coming from where the magical creatures are kept?

He had less than a second to comprehend what that might mean before the previously shut double doors closing off the lower levels blew apart and an olive-black dragon emerged from inside.

Harry froze in shock. The creature bellowed, the incredible decibels stabbing the air, until it was shoved aside by yet another dragon, a Common Welsh Green.

Hissing at the shove, the olive one snaked out of the doorway, slashing its tail to its side to clear away Ministry officials and Death Eaters it deemed invading its personal space. The unlucky fireteam nearest to it bolted out of the way, the scaly limb lashing over their heads. A couple of them barely got out of the way and crashed to the floor; a swipe of the dragon's forearms knocked them into the air.

Whoever was next to him swore and blasted off a hex. Harry, still too stunned to move, only watched as the curse was partially absorbed by the dragon's hide, a snapping snout in the caster's direction the only acknowledgement that it had felt the attack.

They're only juveniles, he cataloged vaguely, flashing back to his own unfortunate encounter with a certain Hungarian Horntail. They couldn't be more than thirty feet fully extended.

Screams brought him out of the observation. This time, Harry did his own cursing, not all of it literal, as the infuriated pair trampled further into the foyer. A group of hostages were in dangerously close vicinity to the olive one's feet.

"Accio!"

The man about to be crushed by the dragon's movement flew towards him, but Harry didn't have time to make sure he landed gently as he repeated the spell for the person about to meet the fate he'd just spared the man from, courtesy of the Common Welsh.

Death Eaters broke formation; bound prisoners wriggled futilely and desperately across the floor to crawl away from the approaching creatures. No, Harry wanted to yell. Though he hadn't articulated the thought, he believed that since the Death Eaters had put all these people in danger, it was their responsibility to get them out of it. If they died, it would be their fault – Harry's fault. Don't break formation! You're the only ones capable of protecting these wandless people!

He was about to shout the order, but then remembered that he was the newest recruit; he had no authority. Not only that, but if he did say something, given his position, it would almost be seen as a slight to Ron, who was the designated leader in this operation.

Can you afford to undermine Ron and the others, who have seniority over you? Your potential decorations could be in jeopardy.

The two choices were knocked from his mind when the olive roared. His hands flew to his ears, but even as he tried to cover them, he realized he could make out two words: 'where' and 'brood'.

Deciphering what it meant from those two words would take more conjecture than Harry could spare at the moment. It was the fact that he could understand it that caught his attention.

Of course! Parseltongue was the language of snakes. Dragons were related. It made sense that he could understand at least part of what the dragon was saying. However, he figured it was like a person trying to speak Italian and hope a Spaniard would know what he meant; Harry could barely get the gist of it was. The fact that the 'dragon speak' was a mixture of Parseltongue-like hissing and roars didn't make comprehension any easier.

When another batch of Death Eaters scrambled backwards, it became clear to Harry that they were just as panicked as everyone else. Ron wasn't present at the moment; the apparent loss of their commander had massacred morale. On top of that, training hadn't taken into account a sudden outbreak of two juvenile dragons. They were hardly feeling generous enough to risk their lives unless for anyone but themselves.

His daze drifted from the people to the dragons. The incredibly enraged dragons. Harry had spoken to snakes; he knew that they could be related to through human psychology. If the dragons were human, Harry would say the panic and anger of their captivity was mainly the cause of their attack. Dragons had tempers; if these two were anything like the Horntail, he doubted spells were going to make them any calmer.

But words? What if –

You're not actually considering using Parseltongue in front of every Death Eater here, are you? the part of him that was either logic or self-preservation was incredulous.

He was torn. What was he going to do? This world's Death Eaters thrived on stereotypes about Dark magic and likely believed all of them. If Harry revealed that he could speak to snakes, it was highly probable that he wouldn't only be labeled as a Dark wizard, which, he thought, was rather ironic considering the Death Eaters were said to be Dark themselves, but be persecuted as well.

Come on, Harry! Think, think, think, thin - !

“Twenty One, stop standing around!” Hugo gave him a push. “Do something!” As the olive dragon reared back and flapped its wings, pounding air currents into their faces, Harry took Hugo’s unwittingly given advice. Harry ran forward, hollering in Parseltongue. “Stop! Stop!”

His acute hearing lapped up each and every horrified/shocked gasp. He shoved the realization that he was feeling an inexplicable clench in his chest at the reactions away. He knew it was an instinctive response to rejection and he shouldn’t let it divert his attention.

A harsh reptilian snout snapped at him in response to his efforts at communication. Harry ducked just in time, ears protesting as savage gutturals tore from the dragon’s throat. Wonderful, he carped. It was like trying to decipher the world’s heaviest accent and a vaguely familiar language in one. The only phrase he could make out, and even that was a guess, was “let me out!”

“You’re hurting these people – just calm down- !” He propelled himself to the floor just in time to avoid getting his skull bashed from its tail. “Stop it! I’m trying to help!”

The roar that sent shockwaves throughout the walls was completely incomprehensible. Jaws descended. Harry rolled out of the way and leapt to his feet. “Sectumsempra!” The curse nicked its hide, and he was forced to dive out of the way as it attempted to slap him with its wings.

Harry nimbly sprang to his feet. Snape’s borderline Dark curse wasn’t working and it was one of the most adept spells he knew that cleanly pierced objects/creatures. He didn’t even have to try a reducto to know that it would pale in comparison to the already insignificant sectemsempra’s effect.

Its scales are magic resistant! He forced himself to think logically as he dodged. You have to try something else. TheConjunctivitus Curse? Sirius had said that he had been planning to suggest it to him for the Triwizard Tournament. It was worth a shot.

He fired it off, remembering to aim for its eyes, but the great lizard had jerked its head away at the last minute. Nevertheless, he had hit close to his target. It thrashed in fury.

In hindsight, Harry thought he should have guessed that a creature as temperamental as a dragon wouldn't be taken down or pacified by a spell that cause it pain, but it was too late now. The dragon blindly struck out at anything around it, and Harry barely managed to Banish and Summon people out of the way in time.

An agonized cry to his right told him that someone had been injured. His eyes snapped towards the sound. The non-Death Eaters were scrambling in every direction for a way out. Naturally, the sudden onslaught of tiny bodies was further inciting the dragon's wrath.

They'll get themselves killed like that! Harry ran in a circle around the dragon he was attempting to talk to and it whirled around to follow. He was probably going to have to risk insulting Ron and the rest of the Death Eaters. They needed someone to direct them, and if Ron wasn't there... "Sonorus. Lambda, let them get to the elevators!"

"What?"! He heard someone yell, the tone anger mingled with fear. "We were told to-"

"Do you honestly think that aurors won't be alerted to come here anyway?" Harry shouted back.

"You're a Dark wizard!"

He was ashamed to say that, with adrenaline as the icing on the cake, he actually smirked at the irony before wiping it off his face. "I don't have time to argue with you! Just-"

"Let them leave!" Ron's voice rang throughout the foyer on the Sonorus Charm. "Get the dragons to the surface!"

Harry almost cheered at the redhead's timely appearance, almost ready to chalk it down to divine intervention. Ron sent a Banishing spell at the nearest dragon. It knocked it off balance long enough for

Harry to cross the foyer back to Teddy and Hugo. "Quietus." Then the order registered. The surface?

The surface?

Shifting into his animagus form, Ron deftly evaded the two dragons' movements and reached the other side where the majority of the Death Eaters were. He slid back into his human body, his presence visibly taming his subordinates, who were already hurrying to obey his orders.

Harry had only been in 'Death Eater boot camp' for three days; he hadn't been there long enough to have the impulse to question an authority figure's orders based on his own feelings beaten out of him. The surface was the Microsoft building they were under and the city surrounding it.

Harry started to object, "But the Statute of-"

"Follow your orders! This space is enclosed. If we don't get them out of here, it will be a bloodbath!" After a pause, Harry gave a curt nod. Saving people's lives were more important to him than keeping the Ministry happy. "Stunners on my mark!"

It would only be later after he mulled over everything that had happened that day that Harry would recall how completely unsurprised Ron was by the appearance of such a seemingly unlikely situation. He'd also find it significant that the fireteam that had gone with Lambda's leader hadn't had their objectives broadcasted to the squad like the rest of their duties were and how he seemed to be going against common knowledge that Stunners were ineffective against dragons and ordering it anyway.

Since so much of this universe was consistent with his own, Harry knew that he could reasonably say that Charlie worked with dragons here, too. Ron would know that if they seriously wanted to bring down a dragon, he should have ordered them to target a specific point in the dragon; the combined spells would have an effect, but one spell on a variety of locations wouldn't do anything.

The Death Eaters, gaining confidence in the presence of their leader, started to put up a resistance. "Mark!" Red lights hit the dragons but dissipated on contact.

Harry backed up a step and stumbled before regaining his footing. What had been in his way? He glanced back. Skeeter's handbag was the apparent culprit. Harry glared at the reporter, who was cowering a few feet away. There was an oddly speculative look in her eyes that he really didn't like.

She couldn't possibly be thinking of writing a story at a time like this could she? "Get out of here!" he yelled just in case. The woman was twisted; who knew what she thought? "Use the elevators!"

He turned back at the sound of one of the dragons snarling. This isn't working, Harry thought as he assessed the situation. Spells aren't going to work. I have to find another way.

Suddenly Ron launched a *confringo* at the dome above, which exploded on contact. As he Banished the falling shards, Harry took in the sunlight pouring through the crater.

The surface! The dragons had to get up there, but how?

The Swedish snarled one last time before launching off its haunches and flapping to the ceiling. Harry distinctly heard shrieks above; the dragon was clawing its way onto a Muggle street and igniting all the expected fanfare.

He flinched, almost certain that he could hear the Statute of Secrecy being shot to Hell.

But that aside, why wasn't the other dragon moving?

Harry let out a crossbreed of a growl and a sigh. It's too caught up in its own anger to care about escape. Well, if it needed some encouragement, he was happy to give it!

He lifted up his wand, ready to shout a spell that would send ropes shooting out to bind the dragon. A simple *incarcerous* didn't have the



firepower to contain it. The ropes it produced would easily break. He was certain that this spell would work though.

Now the question was whether Harry would be strong enough to keep his footing. If the dragon tossed its head, would he go flying? He was supposed to be strong, but...

This is a bad idea, his mind insisted. Very bad. Extremely bad! Stick with another spell. There's always another way if you just think hard enough –

“Aggh!” The pain-filled yell trumpeted in the air.

Immediately all thoughts of safety and alternatives fled from Harry's thoughts. “Funis!” A lash of grey streaked out from his wand and tried itself to the dragon's neck. Harry dug his feet into the ground, grabbed onto the rope with two hands, and pulled. Startled cries issued forth when the dragon stumbled forward before regaining its footing, now more furious than ever.

Unfazed by Harry's campeador strength, Ron grabbed onto the rope. Another Death Eater followed after a moment of immobility.

Three people against the weight of a young dragon. In a normal situation, there wouldn't be any doubt who would win.

It seemed that in an abnormal situation, there wasn't any doubt either.

If it had just been a competition between the dragon's neck muscles, Harry would have won. Generally, that's what a lot of people and quite a few animals did. Unfortunately, when the dragon thrashed, it put its entire body weight into the motions. Harry was strong, but he couldn't hold down something the weight of an elephant. He had just enough time to register that his feet were sliding across the floor before he was airborne.

“Holy cra-!” Harry was suddenly reunited with the floor. “Agh...” Pain jetted up his arms, the part of him that had connected first. “I'm never doing that again...”

“Harry!” Ron shouted, abandoning all protocol about not using his name. “Watch out!”

A shadow fell over him. Uh oh. He snapped his eyes open and would have yelped if he wasn’t too caught up listening to shrieking self-preservation instincts. He had landed less than a foot away from the rampaging, murderous, and entirely too close dragon!

Like I said: holy crap! Without thinking, Harry dove beneath its belly, swearing profusely. He was certain a truck had barreled into him, judging by the sensations his body was experiencing.

The dragon’s feet stamped around him as he was still under it. When the dragon whirled to the side and Harry came to regret his decision to hid under its stomach as one of its feet grazed his head as it moved. “Argh!” The errant foot knocked him to the other side, safe from being trampled, but now exposed to the likelihood of being a mid mass destruction snack.

“Kill you!”

The scaly creature’s declaration was all the encouragement Harry needed to do a backwards shoulder roll despite his body’s discouragements. The pain was worth it when it allowed him to throw himself to his feet.

He scrambled behind the dragon’s tail just as its head spurted towards him. Teeth snapped where his head had just been. Spell time, Harry decided. “Conjunctivitus!”

A miss! Harry jumped back to its other side, only to have the dragon turn and hunt him again. As he was busy trying to stay alive, he had forgotten Ron’s order. However, he reminded him.

“Twenty One!” Ron barked and Harry’s head snapped over to him. “Get the dragon to the surface.”

Harry had too many surprises in the last few minutes to be surprised by another one. Ron was telling him, specifically, to get the dragon out of the Department?

Thus implying, Tom's mildly amused drawl spoke to him, that you possess qualities that deem you specifically suited to the task. Now, what quality do you possess that Weasley could possibly be referring to?

My campeador abilities, Harry thought.

...And your nearness to the dragon.

If he had actually been there, Harry would have glared. Like so many of the things Tom said, his tone conveyed a second message. In this case, he thought Harry was being reckless and far too impulsive.

Which I probably am, given that I'm here in the first place. Harry shook himself. He needed an idea. Something that used either his nearness to the dragon or his strength. He figured Ron wasn't referring to his impressive dodging skills with his comment. Besides spells, was there something he could use? Something in the environment, perhaps?

The rope! He could use that, couldn't he? A wild plan blossomed in his mind that used the two qualities Ron was seemingly pointing out.

It might be crazy, but it just might work. But if I'm going to go with it...where is that damn rope?!

He ducked under its tail and narrowly avoided a blow from its descending wing. They were too close to the wall for him to run properly, and Harry didn't want to try anyway. His mental betting pool on how long he was going to last was looking grim, and he didn't want 'grimmer' to be added to the list of already depressing adjectives describing it.

Alright, let's try and think. Is there any place it can't hit me in this enclosed space?

The suicidal answer came to him: its neck.

Harry had to question the state of his sanity when answers like this came to him.

Oh no, logic started, no you don't!

While he was arguing with himself, the tip of a wing whacked him over the head. A dazed Harry stumbled forward, but saw his opening. Using the wing like a ramp, he kicked off the delicate appendage and belly flopped onto its back. He was never so grateful for gravity as he was then; physics caused him to slide down its arched back to the crook of its neck.

Harry slammed into it with an 'oof'. Instinctively he wrapped his arms around it, thankful that its youth meant that its neck was only about the size of an older sapling and so easier to hold onto. He doled out more thanks, this time to quidditch for making his legs strong enough to hold on and seized the swinging rope in one hand.

"Twenty One!"

"Har – Twenty One, get off!" Teddy was frantic. "You'll get yourself killed!"

Harry didn't need to be a parselmouth to know what the dragon was bellowing at him. He held on for dear life as it swung in a circle, trying to shake him off.

"Get off of there!"

"Reducto! Twenty One-"

"Stay where you are!" Ron interrupted, horror fading into a calm years of experience had forged. That hadn't exactly been what he was thinking when he'd given the order, but what was done was done. He had seen enough of Hadrian's strength when they were still in Hogwarts to know that Harry wouldn't be thrown off. He refused to let concern obstruct the mission objective – the dragons had to make it to the streets. "Grab the rope and yank back! Keep it off balance!" Put it in enough pain to force it to stop fighting.

Hugo, who had run up to his father when the dragon had threw him, cried, "But he might-!" One look was enough to silence him.

Harry was only vaguely aware of the shouts as he gritted his teeth. "Fly to the surface!"

Words and suggestions comparable to invective. And, realized, some of them were from Ron, who hadn't heard his first use of Parseltongue until then.

"Get," he ground out, ignoring that development, "to the surface!" Could it not understand him or did it just not care? Harry tightened his hold on its neck, hoping that if the latter was the case, he would be making it uncomfortable enough to get its attention. Or at least hold it in place long enough for Ron and the Death Eaters to do something about it!

He yanked on the rope and the dragon's bellows were cut off as its neck was yanked backwards. "Listen to me – go through the ceiling! Do it!" The dragon struggled, thrashing even more, but Harry was unmovable. The world flew by as a haze of colors as the dragon attempted to throw him off again by dashing around.

"Release me!"

Without the harsh undercurrent that the angle Harry had put its neck in canceled out, the dragon was far more understandable.

He bargained, "Fly up there and I'll do it." He battled against inertia as it tossed itself around again. Harry's stomach protested, churning uncomfortably. Just when he started pondering whether or not he was becoming nauseous, Harry suddenly found himself buffeted by strokes of wind. The dragon soared into the air, leaping out of the ceiling. Harry tensed for the impact as it landed. Immediately, it slithered the two of them out in the streets.

Harry jammed his eyes shut against the unexpected light, not daring to raise a hand to shield himself from it. He squinted, rapidly realizing that they were in the streets, not the Microsoft building.

The sounds of someone slamming car brakes and skidding to a halt broke into his hearing. All around him is was fender benders galore. Harry increased his grip to a choke hold when his unwanted ride reared up and roared.

Merlin! Harry's eyes widened. Muggles! Muggles were everywhere!

All around him frantic Muggles were either running, screaming, or snapping pictures. The final action in that list caused the blood to drain from his face. The Obliviators could take care of memories, but cameras? Cameras attached to city buildings were possible to get rid of, but if any of these people had evidence of the Wizarding world and ran before the Obliviators could get them...

You have risked the exposure of our world! He could hear Snape's voice from Second Year after the Car Incident.

The other dragon that had escaped before the olive one had its claws entrenched onto the side of a skyscraper. Harry's dragon decided to settle for the ground. It opened its mouth and let out a torrent of flames at the car in front of it.

"Stop it!" Harry cried as the offending vehicle exploded in flames.

"Dismount!"

"Not if you're going to attack everyone in sight! Stop and I'll get off." He didn't know what the next hiss meant, but from the tone, Harry guessed that the dragon thought he was lying. "I'm not lying! I will-agh!" He jammed his arms around it, feeling his muscles strain as they fought against the momentum of the dragon's latest swing.

It was getting more and more violent. Harry, on the other hand, was getting more and more angry. He felt an assault of fear as the dragon knocked someone out of the way and its victim went flying dangerously high in the air. It slapped its neck against one of the cars and Harry hissed in pain when his leg was subsequently bashed against the car door.

“Stop it! Please,” he tried. His arms and hands increased their already crushing grip on the dragon’s neck.

The shouts and cries became a deafening blur. The world seemed to narrow. Harry couldn’t help but let out a yell when something slashed his leg. Wetness he knew to be blood trickled down his leg in crimson streams. The burning lanced up his leg and Harry gritted his teeth, his effort to keep from being thrown off just that much harder.

Another sound of terror. A flash of a camera. Fury seared Harry’s veins. “Stop it or you’ll regret this,” he found himself hissing. Then a young girl screamed as the dragon leapt to snap at her, and Harry felt himself almost choking on rage as he looked into those crying, terrified eyes.

“Don’t you hurt her!” A surge of pure, delicious strength hurdled into his arms as he automatically pulled the dragon’s neck to the side in an effort to make it miss the kid.

A sickening crack echoed in the air. Abruptly, the dragon fell forward, its attack aborted.

Harry had time to feel a sliver of confusion over his fury before he leapt off the dragon and it tumbled into the streets. He landed like a cat and was instantly standing, wand in his hand and magic thrumming through its phoenix core.

The sudden power he’d felt had almost made him feel invincible and all his fears had evaporated. Adrenaline was causing a part of him to eagerly await the dragon’s rising. To deliver the blow to incapacitate it and stop it from terrorizing the people around him, but also...because he dared it to challenge him. Stand up to me, it goaded. Let’s see if your power can match mine. Let’s see you give me a challenge.

He knew he was grinning. Madly, even, but he was too caught up to care. Why should he hide it? It might be unnerving, but why should he have to hide it to make other people happy—?

Why isn't it moving? The thought brought a slight frown to his brow. Confusion, annoyance, concern: it should be moving. Harry waited. The dragon was completely immobile.

"Is it," he heard someone venture, "dead?"

Dead? As if. Why would it be...oh. No. Harry was immediately sobered. He'd killed the dragon? How? You snapped its neck! You killed it..!

Involuntarily, he stepped back, breath coming shorter, more like gasps. Oh, he knew he had just protected the Muggles by doing it. He knew that if the dragon died it solved a lot of likely unsolvable problems – the dragon hardly seemed like it was going to calm down – but he hadn't even meant to do it. It had just...happened. It had been out of his control.

"Manslaughter," he whispered faintly to himself, though that wasn't entirely right. The dragon wasn't a man, after all. But Harry was a parselmouth. He had heard it speak. It wasn't just a mindless beast to him. He knew it was sentient...and that made killing it feel like killing a human being. A belligerent human being, but nevertheless, a human being. By accident.

If I can do that on accident, it dawned on him, how am I supposed to make sure I don't have the same accident some other time? But next time, it could be worse. What if –

"Harry!" It was Ron. Harry turned and the Doberman animagus let out a breath of relief. Thank all that is holy and sacred, he thought as he jogged up to the boy, that he was Felix Felicis running through his veins instead of blood.

"R-Ron," Harry started. "The Muggles..." They saw everything. Sweeping his eyes around, he could see them snapping pictures, pointing, and whispering. At this point, not as many as he would have liked were fleeing. Instead, they were crowding around to get a better view. The two dragons was completely destroyed the surrounding area; cars were wrecked, buildings were smashed, the occasional object was charbroiled, and more.



How was he supposed to get rid of the evidence? He jerked when he heard someone take a picture of him, of all people. Please tell me that the Obliviators are going to get here soon.

Should he perform more magic by Banishing the damaged cars?

Ron grabbed his arm. "We have to leave. Now."

"But-"

"Let the Muggles flounder about," he instructed him. "Like attracts like; the fools from the Ministry will meet the fools here and be done with it. They're not worth the time it would take to calm them." Harry was too stunned by the scathing, scorn-filled remark to do anything but stare. Because of that, he noticed the calculation in Ron's eyes as he very deliberately shot a barrage of fire at the dragon, causing it to erupt into a ball of flame.

More screams. A twisted grin wormed itself onto Ron's mouth. Running about like headless chickens, he sneered to himself. It was times like this when their side's belief that Muggles needed to be carefully controlled and selectively allowed to breed was solidified. It was like pruning a tree.

His work was done. The mission was a complete success, in large part thanks to Harry. He glanced at him. The boy was paler than usual. Well, at least he would be happy that he won his decorations. He certainly would be earning one for this, though that was fifty percent of the logic of putting him in the lowly Lambda Squad in the first place: standing out would be that much easier. That way, no one could mutter about favoritism when Harry ascended the ranks. Plus, earning decorations and the rewards that came with it would endear him to them somewhat.

He surveyed the place one last time before drawing Harry away. The brilliant technology Muggles possessed would deliver the fatal blow that they needed towards the Ministry. With this blatant violation of the Statute of Secrecy, confidence in the Ministry's competence

would reach an all time low. The Wizarding world would rally for change. Not to mention the international repercussions...

"Ron," Harry asked quietly, "will that spell...be enough?"

No. The dragon will barely be damaged because of its hide. The firemen will put it out and have proof of today's events. "It will burn the dragon to ashes. Don't worry." He pulled out his necklace, the portkey back to headquarters. Most of the Death Eaters had apparated onto the road when he had. "Let's go." He pointed to the portkey to herald to the rest of them that the battle was over and it was time to return.

A prickle from his scar told him that Hadrian was feeling particularly pleased. Tom restrained himself from rubbing it and tightened his hold on the letter in his hands. It was from Dumbledore, short, and told him to come to his office. Apparently Rufus Scrimgeour, the Minister of Magic, wanted to speak to them both. Given the fact that his scar was bleating against his occulumency shields with positive emotions, Tom surmised that the results of the attack the horcrux had been taunting them about were successful.

He wondered about that, actually. His occulumency shields were particularly strong; why was it that the connection was still so strong? Any other mental connection should have been blocked. Once again, he speculated on the nature of the scar and his connection to the Dark Lord.

Another prickle. Tom paused. The Minister can wait a few more minutes, he decided and opened the nearest classroom door. Luckily, since it was dusk, there weren't any students inside. He sat in one of the chairs and braced his arms on the desk and slowly let down his mental shields.

Immediately he was jerked from the classroom into a warmly painted room. He smiled broadly, gaze passing over the twenty seven people bowed at the waist at his entrance. The messy-haired Death Eater in

front of him glanced around, noting the postures of his companions, and lowered his eyes.

At a gesture of his hand, the Death Eaters straightened. The boy, hearing the rustling, met his gaze. I'd forgotten how green our eyes were, he mused to himself. "Lambda Twenty One. I have been told that you have performed exceptionally today. Congratulations." The people around him, sans himself, clapped, and he quirked an eyebrow as the boy he knew to be Harry ducked his head slightly before summoning back an indifferent stance.

It was one of the differences between the two of them. James Potter had been a pureblood and, as such, he had been raised in a family familiar with politics. Before Lily and James' death, Hadrian had been taught the importance of appearing in complete control of oneself in quasi-formal appearances. He had learned to get over shyness and become comfortable with attention.

He raised a hand and the noise subsided. "You are permitted to choose a level three reward for your actions." Elaborating for Harry's sake, he added, "You can choose to take responsibility for one of the minor prisoners. Other rewards include the currently unreleased technomagic produces in our arsenal and any reward below three." An overwhelming amount of this Death Eaters chose the second option. His followers mostly made up the lower and middle classes, though since there was such a large divide between upper class and middle, middle class wasn't substantially better.

The technomagic products could be used to improve whatever quality of life they had; they even had a monetary reward option. The revenue their organization earned from technomagic and other businesses meant that they were capable of lavish gifts to those who had earned it. Anyone who chose this option also indebted himself, whether knowingly or subconsciously, to the Death Eaters. It hadn't escaped his notice that the rewarded members were the most loyal.

"And of course," he continued, "your efforts would not be possible without your squad to support you. For this, every other member of Lambda shall be given a level one reward."

Another round of clapping. Ron took the moment to lean over and whisper, "Hadrian, we have to talk about something that happened today. It regards Harry." The Dark Lord didn't allow himself to frown, though he could detect the dark undercurrent in the tone. Something was amiss? His pleasure at Harry's success dimmed somewhat. Yes, the applause seemed dimmer than the usual, even for a newly indicted squad, who were usually more nervous about showing any sort of emotion in front of him than the more seasoned ones.

But nevertheless, Harry had done what few had managed to do: he had singlehandedly captured Yaxley, who was considered one of the top duelists in Britain. By doing that, he had made it even more difficult for him to go back to Dumbledore; the 'Light' side would view him as tainted. He'd also made it possible to implement End Game and given him a fountain of information to collect. Every goal had been completed and, as a bonus, Harry had approached him and asked him to train him with no reluctance whatsoever. Odd. Was it related to what Ron was talking about?

Tom resurrected his occulumency shields. He tugged himself from the Dark Lord's mind until the classroom swam back into view. "He's a Death Eater," he mumbled to himself as he became aware of the fact that he was panting on the desk, sweat braided through his hair. At least I didn't collapse on the floor like I do most of the time.

But back to the main issue: Harry, a Death Eater?

He slapped away immediate conclusion that he had decided to become Hadrian's ally and forced himself to think. Why would Harry become a Death Eater? There were logical reasons aside from belief in Hadrian's cause. Harry was the Boy Who Lived in his world. Tom doubted that he would throw himself into serving his counterpart even if he did profess to be for non-pureblood rights.

Hadrian had been talking about a reward system. He'd mentioned a prisoner as a prize specifically. Perhaps Harry had done it to claim 'responsibility' for one of the prisoners? Lucius, possibly? A sliver of relief came to him at the thought, but he told himself to finish analyzing the rest of the situation before passing judgment.

Harry asked the Dark Lord to train him. Why? Normally he would be horrified and a part of him was. It sounded like Harry was trying to become Hadrian's protégé, his 'Black Knight', if the chess terminology the Inner Circle liked to use was applied.

He couldn't come up with a reason for the time being, but he wasn't willing to condemn Harry for that. Tom knew that Harry largely based his decisions on selflessness. Therefore, it was likely that he had a seemingly selfless reason.

The Minister is waiting. He glanced at the clock and realized he'd been immersed in the vision for five minutes. Not a lot of time normally, but Scrimgeour loathed tardiness, and given the situation, he would be in an even fouler temper if Tom delayed. He quickly stood and made his way to the gargoyle, where he called out, "Licorice wands" and stepped past the stone guardian.

I would be unsurprised, he commented, if the Minister, the former Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, is here to talk about whatever nefarious scheme the horcrux was referring to. He strode up to the headmaster's door, taking into account that Dumbledore hadn't greeted him like he usually would. He took this as foreshadowing of the assuredly fuming Minister within.

Tom opened the door. "Good afternoon, Minister, headmaster-"

"You're late," Scrimgeour stated curtly.

"I apologize." He located one of the seats and sat down, aware of the fact that the Minister was standing. The leonine man paced.

"Dumbledore, are you aware of what happened just two hours ago?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Really." He halted. "No one told you?" Tom picked up the allusion to the Order and Dumbledore denied it again. It was mostly true; they had known something was going to happen, but not where. By the time they someone had contacted the Ministry and by extension the

Order members, it had been too late to do anything but call in the Obliviators.

“Skeeter was there,” the Minister grunted. “No doubt she’ll have the full, meticulously overblown and documented story out tomorrow. The public will be in an uproar!”

“What exactly happened sir?” Tom decided to intervene.

Scrimgeour eyed him. “The Death Eaters attacked the Lancaster office of the Department of the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. Several members of the Ministry were visiting because of the two illegally smuggled dragons that were being transported out of the country. They took several captives; random workers, like a lot of their raids. But the general consensus is that the true target was Yaxley.”

Tom stiffened. The head of the Auror Office, Thickness, Yaxley...he could see the pattern. The Death Eaters were systematically eliminating high ranking Ministry officials that weren’t on their side. It wasn’t Hadrian’s style to use the Imperius; he preferred much more blatant approaches.

“Yaxley’s loss wasn’t all that we have to recover from. The two dragons in the Department were released into the Muggle city, no doubt purposefully. The Obliviators could not catch every person who was a witness, and many of the Muggles have physical evidence through their cameras. Already photos are being posted on the Inter..web? Net. Internet.”

“Into the Muggle city?” Dumbledore’s voice was grave and his eyebrows elevated. “He has never done something this audacious before...”

“He’s getting confident, Albus. Too confident – he has something up his sleeves and we need to figure out what it is before he plays it.”

Damn Hadrian and his complete disregard for the Statute of Secrecy! Tom ordered himself to unclench his fists and appear somewhat calm about this alarming news. The overwhelming majority of the Muggle

population would dismiss the dragons and photos as either a government experiment gone awry, or as a hoax. He wasn't as concerned about that. However, the international ramifications this caused were staggering. "Minister, how are the other Wizarding governments reacting to this?"

"How do you think?" Scrimgeour glared. "It is a catastrophe! Do you know what Article 73 of the International Statute for Wizarding Secrey reads, Mr. Riddle? Do you?"

"Rufus," Dumbledore admonished mildly. "Please. Tom is not at fault."

"But he is the 'Chosen One', isn't he? And another thing, though I'll get to that later. The Statue reads, and I quote, 'Each Wizarding governing body will be responsible for the concealment, care and control of all magical beasts, beings, and spirits dwelling within its territory's borders. Should any such creature cause harm to or draw the notice of the Muggle community, that nation's Wizarding governing body will be subject to discipline by the International Confederation of Wizards'. Do you know what that means?"

"Our Ministry will essentially be punished by whatever means the international community sees fit."

"Exactly! And do you know what they're doing? Albus, you're the Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards – you must have heard what they want to do!"

"There have been no definite plans, Rufus."

"They want to appoint Cedric Diggory as Minister!" Scrimgeour continued, ignoring Dumbledore's words. A vein bulged in his neck as he growled, "Diggory is said to be a Dark sympathizer. Apparently he was an associate of You-Know-Who's before he came into power. His charisma is a danger for us!"

"I am quite certain that Mr. Diggory is not a Death Eater."

"I am too. But I know that his wife is a Muggleborn, and she may sway him into doing-"

“Just because she is a Muggleborn,” Tom interrupted, “does not mean that she is a Death Eater.” That sort of stereotyping had been the reason that so many pureblood had been prejudiced against ‘mudbloods’ in the past. Quite a few of the sentiments lasted in the present, though tampered by necessity. Appearing to despise Muggleborns with Hadrian on the loose was not a wise course of action. Inadvertently, a lot of the newer pureblood generation had become more open to the idea of Muggleborn equality.

“Hadrian wants the Ministry afraid and its citizens doubtful of our abilities to work as a credible government,” Scrimgeour informed them after he’d finished glaring at Tom for cutting him off. “Less support for us means more support for ‘change’ – him. Or at least, a Minister that You-Know-Who wants in power. He’s always talked about tearing the Ministry apart from its foundation and completely reworking it to his vision of perfection. Pah!” He spun around and scoured Tom’s face. “As for you boy – catch!” He tossed a Daily Prophet at him, which Tom caught. Carefully, he turned it to the front page. “It’s an advance copy of the issue that will be released tomorrow morning.”

Dumbledore peered over his spectacles, observing the way Tom’s fingers curled on the paper and that he bit his lip. “Tom?”

For a moment he didn’t answer. “The title,” he then read clearly, “reads ‘Dark Lord’s Heir Makes Debut’.” Dumbledore stopped breathing. “Skeeter has given a rather fantastical account of the attack in Lancaster, claiming that-”

Scrimgeour butted in, “Not ‘claiming’. Knowing! Albus, that dragon may have just been progressing into adolescence, but that Death Eater broke its neck with his bare hands. Hands! He’s a bloody campeador – you can’t tell me that that is a coincidence!”

Dumbledore wasn’t certain how to answer as he drank in the facts. He and Tom exchanged looks. It would only be Harry.

Neither of them was going to reveal this to Scrimgeour, however.



"Wait." The two adult wizards turned their attention to Tom. "It says here that..."

"Ah yes," Scrimgeour smiled grimly. "I see you've gotten to the good bit. Where were you in the last two hours?"

Tom's eyes widened in mingled surprise and outrage. "I am not the one who-"

"Tom was in Hogwarts the entire time," Dumbledore said.

"Are you certain?"

"Minister," Tom seethed, "just because I am a parselmouth and Skeeter claims that this Death Eater is one as well does not mean that I and he are one and the same!" Dumbledore started. Tom quickly passed him a look that said that he would talk to him about Harry's ability to talk to snakes after Scrimgeour left.

The Minister studied him for a while and Tom met his gaze steadily. No doubt he was attempting to discern the truth from his expression since he didn't feel even a strand of legilimency. Eventually he said, "Good. I had to be certain. After all, you match his description apart from that particular trait as well. You understand that, don't you Mr. Riddle?"

"Of course," Tom replied coolly.

"Now, I realize what's done is done, but in light of these events, I think that you have a duty to Wizarding Britain. Your endorsement of the Ministry will do wonders for public support and morale. You could give a statement of course, but it would be even better if you appeared to be actively hunting Dark wizards in response to You-Know-Who's actions. The International Wizarding governments may even settle down and lay off."

"Tom has to attend school."

Scrimgeour retorted, "You and I both know that Mr. Riddle is far from the average student. He has straight O's; he has won several

prominent dueling competitions; he's doing independent studies in Defense, Charms, and Transfiguration because he's so far ahead of the Hogwarts and even the auror curriculum. On top of that, he is marked by the prophecy as You-Know-Who's equal. He's a beacon of hope! His grades will hardly suffer if he skips a few classes. What do you say, Mr. Riddle?"

Tom looked at him. "We will have to arrange an appropriate schedule, but I am willing to do some auror work. I agree; it will reassure the public." And if I ever meet Harry, I might be able to get him out of Hadrian's clutches. I have been able to beat any auror that I've dueled with; I would be the most likely person to be able to clear away the Death Eaters around him.

Unless he really did join Hadrian.

I don't believe that, came the firm response.

"Excellent. Then I'll leave you two to your business, shall I? Headmaster, Mr. Riddle," he nodded. "We'll be in touch." He grabbed a handful of Floo powder and threw it into the fireplace. "Ministry of Magic!" Emerald green enveloped him and he disappeared.

Tom turned to Dumbledore. "The Minister is correct. Hadrian is becoming far too confident to not feel as if his plans are coming to a close."

"The close," Dumbledore sighed. "Something will end, whether it be the Ministry of Hadrian and his forces. For now there is little we can do." Reluctantly, Tom nodded. "Now, what is this about Harry being a parselmouth?"

The Slytherin sighed and resigned himself to telling the story.

A/N: Wow, the site had a 'technical glitch' for four entire days (0.o). I actually had the chapter done and was trying to post all weekend, but hey, it's here now, and much longer than I had thought it would be. Anyway, enough of my random comments. Based on the poll and the reviews I've gotten, I've decided on which side Harry is going to join.

Even if the side you wanted wasn't the 'winning' one, I'm still going to try and incorporate any suggestions that were made, but a large thank you to everyone who gave me their thoughts or suggestions!

If you want to review, I leave the following questions you could help me with:

1. Too much action? Where some parts stretched?
2. Did you feel like I had a couple of run-ons?
3. Did I put enough indecision at the part where Harry handed Yaxley over?
4. Any other comments...I actually thought the general writing quality of this chapter was better; hopefully you thought so too (better than the last one, at least 0.o)
5. Was characterization pretty consistent with the way the characters were portrayed previously in this story?

Thanks for reading! Oh, and if anyone's interested, I fiddled around with Photoshop and so my avatar is currently a picture of how I picture Hadrian. Look if you're curious?

## Chapter Fifteen

The Dark Lord's fist sailed by Harry, grazing his cheekbone. With an intake of breath he threw himself backwards to avoid the follow up, bringing two legs in the air in an action more reminiscent of a handstand, hoping he'd hit Hadrian's chin.

But that was the trouble of fighting against yourself; he knew what you were hoping for. Hadrian batted his kick away with an excessive force that completely destroyed his balance. Harry crashed to the floor and immediately rolled out of the way of a plummeting heel. Knowing that getting up would take time he could not afford to sacrifice, Harry grabbed his wand and pointed it at the blur of motion heading towards him.

Expelliarmus!

The non-verbal spell hit Hadrian in the chest. Harry would have been satisfied if the Dark Lord didn't simply use the momentum to roll to his feet. "Your silent spells are getting better," he commented, immediately charging. "Though that could be attributed to adrenaline."

Harry, who had used the time to get back to his feet, fell into a ready stance. "I'll take that as a compliment." Then a thought annoyed him. "Did you let that spell hit you on purpose?" Hadrian would do that to prove a point about how the Disarming spell could be thrown off.

A smirk was his only reply before one of the aikido techniques Harry was really beginning to loathe redirected the force from his punch to throw him flat on his back. Air deserted his lungs as he slammed against the floor.

Hadrian peered down at him, an eyebrow raised. "What would you do in this situation?"

Harry considered. Hadrian was close enough that he could probably bring his foot up and use the side of it to smack the side of his head. It should be enough to knock him away. He explained this out loud.

“True, but if I happen to be stubborn or well trained enough to hold onto your hand, I could break your wrist. That might be a bit of a draw back.”

“Fine then. I’ll apparate.”

“And if there are anti-apparation wards?”

Harry paused. At the top of his head, he couldn’t think of anything that didn’t have a reasonable chance of being blocked. If this had actually happened in a real battle, he doubted his opponent would be courteous enough to give him the chance to weigh his options. “I’d kick anyway. Anyone who’s attacking me like this will probably provide a worse alternative than a broken wrist.”

Hadrian pulled him to his feet. “A good answer, I think. A lot of physical fighting is purely a matter of how much pain you’re willing to take.”

“Show me how to do that aikido move.”

“I have something else I want to show you.”

Harry’s jaw clenched. “I need to see it.”

“Harry, you haven’t had any formal training whatsoever. The knowledge you have would be most closely related to karate or tae-kwon-do. You can’t suddenly learn aikido, jujitsu, and other completely different forms overnight.”

“I know, but show me anyway. I have to get this one down.”

Hadrian tilted his head, regarding him. “Why so badly?”

Harry didn’t answer at first. He glanced away. “I don’t know if I can control my abilities. I killed...I killed that dragon without even meaning to.”

“What else could you have done?”

"I don't know! I just...that's not the point, is it? What if I get mad at someone else – a human this time – and I accidentally kill them? I can't let something like that happen."

"Sometimes, Harry, death is the only option."

The words chilled him. He had a feeling of absolute certainty that that idea hadn't been applied to just that one circumstance. "Most of the people in the missions," Harry began slowly, "are innocents. What if I'm trying to hold them back from running and I break their bones or something? I-"

"That won't happen."

"How do you know?"

"Harry..." He paused. "You haven't become experienced enough with campeador abilities to know this, but strength, agility, and etcetera can be channeled. Inside of you is something similar to a lake filled with campeador magic. When you run, punch, or do anything physical that your body wants enhanced, it will sip from it unconsciously. With enough practice, however, the magic inside can be drawn, wrenched out, and commanded. You will consciously feel it within you, awaiting your call."

"But," Harry insisted, "that might be ages away! I don't have that time!"

Hadrian placed a hand on Harry's shoulder. "You were enraged when you killed that juvenile dragon, correct? Think of how you felt then. You had control up to that point. When you come close to feeling that again, use your wand instead. Until you reach a level where you can consciously control your abilities, remember that adrenaline will play a large part in determining how much power you have."

Harry struggled with himself. He shouldn't have lost control like that and he had 'assignments' at least once a week. Could he afford to wait?

Hadrian told him, "I will train you every day, just like I have been doing. Alone, I improved quickly. With a teacher, you will improve exponentially."

Reluctantly, Harry nodded. That's right. He's the only one who can teach me. Both the techniques and be strong enough to safely be a sparring partner. It was a thought that had been bothering him. If he left the Death Eaters, who else would teach him control?

"You wanted to show me something?"

"Someone, to be more exact." He gestured to the door and Harry followed. "I said you would have your reward, and now I will give him to you." Harry stilled for a moment before forcing himself to relax.

He'd been so relieved when he'd heard that something good had come out of what he had done. But now dread uncoiled in his stomach. What would he think of Harry now? Harry was just trying to do the right thing. He didn't know if he could stand someone, a friend or not, looking at him and what he'd done given the circumstances, and judge him the villain.

With that morbid thought running through his mind, they walked through the unnervingly inviting halls, the occasional portrait peering at them, some smiling in greeting, some bowing, some turning away in disgust, and others merely offering a glance before turning back to whatever they were doing.

Harry frowned. Weren't they going the wrong way? According to the map he'd been consulting whenever he moved through the manor, there was nothing here but rooms, storage, and...the sewage overflow. According to the map, the prisoners should be at the other end of the manor. He bit down his automatic urge to ask about it and instead waited to see what would happen. He knew this wasn't a trap or some sort. He could wait.

Hadrian finally stopped in front of a deceptively innocuous double door. He ghosted his hand over the surface and when the ward's magic recognized him, it peeled itself off the handle.

“Wait.” When he had his double’s attention, he asked, “Can I take Lucius outside of the dungeons? Maybe keep him somewhere else? It’s not like he can overpower me or escape.”

It was apparent that Hadrian did not like the idea. He scowled slightly, though not at Harry, but at the thought of the Malfoy boy being treated favorably. Malfoys were one of the Dark Lord’s priority targets. When they were caught, he wanted them to feel the weight of that status. “Keep him in your room. He will not be allowed to leave. If he does, the wards will kill him.”

Harry could fill in the blanks by himself. The only way in and out of Potter Manor was by portkey. Unlike the other Death Eaters, Harry only had one during missions. That meant he probably couldn’t help Lucius. Still, if he tried to break the wards and succeeded, someone else would do their job for them.

“Ask yourself this: do you trust him not to leave?” Hadrian queried. “Does he trust your judgment enough to take your word seriously – that if he leaves he will die?”

“What if...he really can’t leave the room at all?” Harry tried.

“If he leaves the room without an Inner Circle member within a certain distance of him, he will. You will need to escort him if he decides to...venture. Even then he will only be allowed in the hall, the guest rooms you are staying in, and the dining room.”

“But I’m not an Inner Circle member,” he pointed out.

Hadrian smiled broadly. “That hardly matters, since the wards would read you and I as the same person. Now, do you really want to risk it?”

Harry hesitated. Slowly, he resolved, “I’ll decide when I see him. I don’t know how he’d react right now. I need to see his face.” Not that Lucius isn’t a master at manipulating his facial expression and body language, but I can try.



Harry, the ever-so-helpful inner critic in his head sighed, Lucius has absolutely no reason to trust you at all. Granted, you becoming a Death Eater pretty much saved his life, but how does he know that? For all he knows, this is all part of some elaborate scheme of the Dark Lord's. He probably thinks you're a corporeal horcrux, like the diary almost became in your second year. You have no proof to the contrary. And sitting in a jail cell probably tripled his suspicions.

Harry decided that he didn't like his inner critic.

The doors opened. Harry found himself standing at the foot of a descending set of stairs to a large, dimly lit room. A hallway divided the room in half, cells on either side of it. A medium sized bathroom was at the far end of it along with a table and chairs for the guards on duty outside.

As for the cells, he could only describe them as Azkaban-esque. They were cramped, leaving the prisoners with nothing but a pillow and a hard stone floor for company. Jail bars were the décor with an occasional small empty bowl of the last meal or cup shoved in the corner.

At least, Harry shuddered as some of the inmates lifted deadened eyes up at him, the place is warm. It doesn't smell, either. But that was likely for the guards' benefit, not the prisoners'.

Haggard men and women scuttled out of the way, pressing themselves against the walls like trapped animals. "Damn you!" someone hissed at Hadrian, voice cracking. "I'd ask Hell to swallow you up, but not even Hell could stand the likes of you-!"

"Crucio."

Inhuman screams scraped the man's throat. Harry was alarmed to catch the smallest smirk on his counterpart's lips before it vanished and the spell ended. "It's a pity that your mother didn't teach you any manners, or you wouldn't be in this unfortunate situation, Avery. I know that old dog's can't learn new tricks, but try to remember this one, hmm? For your own sake." He smoothly continued onward,

deftly ignoring the flinches and cowering that occurred as he passed each cell. He glanced back. "Coming?"

"Y-yeah." Harry swallowed. Each one of them was staring at him with the same utter terror, the same hatred, and the same accusation. Quickly, he locked his gaze ahead and tried to ignore his guilty heart. It isn't like I am Hadrian. We're entirely different. I mean, I can see similarities...a lot of them...but these people shouldn't be like this to me. I didn't put anyone in here...

Except Yaxley. A part of him really, desperately wanted to know what had happened. A stronger part didn't want to face the knowledge. Why ask questions with obvious answers and put himself on another guilt-trip? Everything was hard enough as it was.

"My Lord." The four guards on duty stood at his appearance and bowed at the waist.

"As you were," Hadrian waved them off. "Return to your posts. This is simply a visitation." His golden eyes latched on to the far cell on the right, where two thin, bony blondes, a woman and a man, stood, holding each other protectively. The man was holding his dirty head high and meeting Hadrian's gaze, managing to appear dignified despite the small bruises coloring his skin. The woman hadn't even bothered. She stared fearfully across from her at a third blonde that Harry almost didn't recognize.

Harry had been halfway convinced that Lucius could walk through a hurricane, be submerged in a mudslide, and wade through a swamp, and still come out as immaculate as ever. Now he had proof to the contrary. His long and previously sleek hair was matted with dirt and something that looked suspiciously like blood. Bruises, some old and some new, were splattered over his face, arms, legs, and Harry knew that if his clothes were any more mangled than they already were, he would see some on the rest of his body as well.

Piercingly sharp silver eyes slid from Hadrian to Harry. The wide-eyed Gryffindor stopped breathing.

Before his capture, Lucius hadn't had enough time to truly see just how similar the two were. He'd seen enough, but now that he was confronted with them almost side to side, he was astounded at the overwhelming resemblance. They shared the same nose, the same jaw, the same shape of the eyes, brow, shoulders, and body. He couldn't deny what he was seeing. Harry was a younger version of Hadrian.

His eyes left the boy and fell on the mildly smiling Dark Lord.

The monster lazily glanced at Lucius' parents. "Enjoying your accommodations? I do hope you've been treated exactly how you deserve..."

The Malfoy couple didn't speak, until the silence was punctured by Lucius' father's raspy, hoarse coughs.

Lucius glared icily. He would not let this creature talk to his parents. Not after what he had done to them. "Leave them be."

"Do you presume to order me?" Hadrian gave a quiet, amused chuckle. "How typical. I wouldn't expect any less from the likes of you, especially now, when you should be honored." His eyes glittered. "Harry could have chosen almost anything he wanted after he performed such a masterful service for the Death Eaters. He turned down all the choicest rewards to have...you."

A flare of anger and betrayal seared his chest. Lucius crushed it. He would have been shocked if this hadn't happened. He'd had plenty of time to ponder Harry's fate. There was little else to do in a cell except try not to lose composure as his father's condition worsened, think, endure taunts, and survive overzealous Weasleys.

"No answer?" Hadrian shrugged and Lucius fists clenched at the nonchalant gesture. He turned to Harry, completely disregarding their presences. "Take your time deciding. The same blood runs in our veins; touch his lock with the intention of opening it and it will open." He surveyed Lucius, and the blonde knew the Dark Lord was getting some sick pleasure out of this from the delighted look shining in his

eyes. "Do keep the Malfoy boy on a tight leash," he drawled, "lest we put him down."

He placed a hand on Harry's shoulder and Harry looked into his eyes. Lucius couldn't see the Dark Lord's face from his position, but the boy seemed to read something there. He nodded after a moment. Lucius detected the slightest discontentment from Hadrian before he strode out of the dungeon as if he were taking a leisurely stroll through his gardens.

Harry was left standing there, struggling to hide his unease but failing miserably. The boy was no actor, which was surprising, given Hadrian's twofaced personality. Or perhaps that isn't so surprising after all, he corrected. Harry was kind to his friends, but could easily be the opposite to his enemies.

His vibrant green eyes flickered over Lucius' face. He is trying to read me, he noted, finding the idea mildly entertaining despite his distrust. His expression remained blank.

Harry inwardly sighed. He wasn't exactly the world's most perceptual person when it came to this, and reading a Malfoy was like trying to read a stone. Still, his conscience forbid him to let anyone, let alone a pseudo friend, rot in a place like this if he could help it. "You don't want to stay here any longer than you need to, right?"

Lucius scrutinized him for a moment before exchanging a look with his parents. No one spoke for a while. Harry knew that the three were having a conversation with their expressions alone, one that he wasn't skilled enough to read. There were some parts, however, that were obvious. Mrs. Malfoy's frantic, pleading expression told him how much she feared for her son. The slight softening in Lucius' told him that he was reassuring his parents, telling them that he would be fine and that he loved them.

Gradually, Lucius stood and arched an eyebrow at Harry, though the aristocratic motion was mostly ruined by his battered state. Glad to be leaving, Harry hurried over to the lock and pressed his palm against it, willing the door to open. His hand tingled; a click sounded and he pulled open the door.

“Lucius..!” his mother’s voice, soft and coarse due to disuse, sounded. She grabbed the bars, her eyes darting between her son and Harry, silently begging him not to go.

“I will be fine, mother. Father.” Lucius gave his father one last look that Harry couldn’t decipher and walked by his side out of the cells. Harry tried not to make his relief too obvious as he opened the door out of the dungeon and shielded his sight against the sudden light. His eyes refused to meet Lucius’, even though he could feel his silver gaze burning the side of his face.

“This way,” Harry muttered, remembering the directions back to his room. A portrait nearby sneered down at Lucius as they passed. Harry shot it a dirty look and the woman inside sniffed before turning away. He personally thought it was hypocritical of the portraits that did such things; they were as pureblooded as Lucius was, yet they despised him, either because he was a Malfoy, or because he was one of the people opposing their only living descendent.

“What exactly,” Lucius asked with an unnatural calm that immediately caused Harry to tense, “are you?”

“...What do you mean?”

He elucidated in the same eerie tone, “I said before my lovely stay in the Dark Lord’s dungeons that you could not possibly be a descendent of his. As I rotted away, I became more convinced that I was correct.”

Harry recognized the sarcastic and livid undertones coursing through the words. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“Tom believed you,” was the cool response. “He and Dumbledore must have known what or who you are. They aren’t fools.”

Harry ran a hand through his hair. The last thing he needed was for Lucius to make his life worse by laughing in his face and calling him a liar. “I was at my relatives’ house when it happened. There was an attack. I thought it was Death Eaters, but it turned out to be

something else,” he said in a rush. “Luna...she’s a friend...she gave me this necklace, saying something about Deathly Hallows and the Will of Peverell. She said my double was trying to cross over, but if I crossed first, he couldn’t go through because I had taken his place. Or something like that. I put on the necklace and...” he took a breath. “Everything changed.”

“‘Changed’?” Lucius repeated with a slight frown. “Elaborate.”

“Well, for one, the battle was over. Or never happened, now that I think about it. My relatives’ house was now for sale. I went to Diagon and some of the older generations seemed afraid of me. The Alley itself looked like it had been hit by an air raid. Dumbledore was suspicious of me. The Dark Lord was after purebloods instead, and Tom had my scar.”

“Your’ scar.” Lucius digested the information and decided to test a theory he had with his next comment. “And the Dark Lord was supposed to be after the impure...”

Harry stabbed him with a glare. “Excuse me?”

“Forgive me,” he drawled. “I meant anyone who wasn’t a pureblood.”

“You said impure. I didn’t think you were a bigot.”

“And I didn’t think you tried to see prejudice in every little comment. I didn’t mean it offensively. It’s just a term.”

“A pejorative one,” Harry retorted. “Don’t use it.”

“As long as you don’t use your own slurs, I won’t.”

“I don’t hate purebloods.”

That was what he was waiting for. “And yet you brought in Yaxley. I hear him screaming every night, though it has dulled to merely strangled cries.” At the flinch his eyes narrowed. “I thought it was you. No one else could have done it. The Death Eaters and their master must be so...proud. His incarceration will be a large blow to-”

"Look, Malfoy," Harry snapped. "Capturing Yaxley was the only way I could keep you from getting killed!" That silenced him. Harry unconsciously quickened his steps, anger simmering in his veins. "Well?" he demanded when he saw that Lucius wasn't following. "Are you coming? The wards will knock you dead if you're too far away from me."

Slowly, Lucius started walking. They didn't speak to each other for a while, with Harry glowering at whatever was in front of him and Lucius struggling to say what needed to be said. "Thank you," he finally uttered quietly. It seemed that Evander - no, Harry - hadn't been manipulated, at least fully, after all.

Harry gave a curt nod, though he realized it must have taken a lot for him to say those words.

A few awkward seconds of silence went by. Then, "You still didn't tell me what you are."

"I'm from an alternate universe," Harry answered with slight terseness. Irritation made it easier to admit. "Say what you want. Tom believes it. Dumbledore acknowledges it as a possibility. Hadrian confirmed it. He's an alternate version of me and I'm an alternate version of him."

"Interesting." Harry glanced at him, unsure whether he was being sarcastic or not. He didn't expect anyone to accept that easily. Maybe he was just humoring him. "You said Tom had your scar. Does that mean that you are the Boy Who Lived in your...world?"

"That's right."

"The Boys Who Lived certainly have remarkable lives."

"You're accepting this rather...quickly. It took Tom months. Dumbledore didn't even seem to entertain the thought until I mentioned Peverell." Harry stopped, identifying the door he was standing beside as his. He twisted the handle and stepped inside.

“Tom and Headmaster Dumbledore are half-bloods. Their Muggle heritage has given them a...narrower sense of what is and what is not possible. Too much logic, perhaps. Besides, I am not arrogant enough to believe that our generation has discovered all that there is to discover about magic.” Lucius peered at the surroundings, his features blank. “They have been treating you...well.” He examined the softness of the sheets and the richness of the furniture. From the way Hadrian had spoken to Evand – Harry - earlier, he’d suspected that this would be the case.

He knew what Hadrian was doing. The question was, did Harry?

Harry shrugged, staring at the floor. “I think I can get someone to transfigure a bed for you. There’s a bathroom over there,” he pointed to the other door in the room. “In case you want to, you know, wash up. I can ask for some more clothes...”

Lucius bit down a sardonic comment about not getting his own room. “Why is it that even if you don’t share his ideology, Hadrian treats you so well?”

Harry started. “Well, I guess he...that is...”

“Is he feeling sentimental?” He barely kept the mockery out of his voice. “Does he consider you to be like a younger brother?”

“I didn’t see much reason to refuse his hospitality,” Harry scowled, “when I can do more in his good graces.”

“Like become a Death Eater.”

“I already said I only did that so you wouldn’t have to stay in that cell!”

“I know. I am grateful. Though you should not have done it.” He sat himself down in the armchair near Harry’s bed.

The other boy stared at him incredulously. “What do you mean I shouldn’t have done it? Hugo and Ron looked like Christmas had come early whenever they mentioned visiting you and your parents.”



Lucius looked up at him. "I have...always been proud of my heritage. Not necessarily for my pureblood status, but because I consider being a wizard an honor. The fact that so many of my ancestors have been wizards and witches heightens that. I value the traditions and the history of the magical." He trained his eyes on his hands. "And I...do not want to see that die. By exterminating purebloods, Hadrian is destroying the Wizarding world's identity. Yaxley was a high ranking Ministry official; he was standing in the way of that. And I...am not."

"So..." Harry reworded. "What you mean is that you'd be willing to suffer torture, maybe even die, if it meant other purebloods were safe?"

"Yes."

He tried to find a way to lighten the atmosphere but couldn't. If it had been his own world, he might have said something about Lucius becoming a Gryffindor after all. In this one it would mean something entirely different. "I don't know if I could have sacrificed anyone I knew."

"When you have something worth fighting for, you will be able to. You will find either the ruthlessness or the bravery to do so." After all, Hadrian did.

Harry sighed and sat on his bed. He flipped his wand in the air and caught it a few times. "How exactly have they been treating you?"

"Do I really need to tell you? It isn't difficult to guess. Purebloods are despised. Malfoys are particularly loathed. Despite all Hadrian's claims to seek equality, he's just as discriminatory as he says we are. Let us not forget how he advocates selective breeding and the banishment of squibs and people without 'enough' magic from our society."

Harry flushed. He was ashamed to say that he had forgotten that part of Hadrian's goals. He'd been so caught up with debating whether what Hermione had said to him and whether his own actions were morally justifiable that he'd stopped seeing the big picture. He'd

forgotten everything else the Dark Lord was trying to accomplish: eugenics and annihilation of purebloods. And he'd seen people he knew in them, and had started to adjust to their company.

And it isn't just the wizards and witches he wants to do this too, he recalled. He wants to do this to muggles, as well. And I know...myself. If I had a cause I believed in so much, I wouldn't just keep it in Britain. I'd take it international. This won't stop once the Ministry has been taken over.

"There are many unfair laws and setups in our current government," Lucius continued, eying the emotions flitting over Harry's face, "but genocide is hardly the answer. It cannot be justified as necessary or for the Greater Good. It is simply Hadrian indulging his bloodlust."

Harry pulled at his fingers. "I don't think he's...entirely doing this for self-satisfaction."

Lucius bit back a retort. He could see that Harry had been struggling in his time here. He'd open his eyes through logic; emotional outbursts were not going to help.

Besides, he was a Malfoy. Malfoys did not have emotional outbursts.

"There is no such thing as a purely evil human, but that doesn't mean there isn't such a thing as a misguided and cruel human." Lucius watched him. "Look at me."

Harry blinked. Reluctantly, he did, seeing the tattered clothes, the pallor of his skin, and the bruises and other injuries scattered over his body.

"I'm just a teenager. I do not know anything Hadrian would find useful, yet this is the treatment I received." He leaned forward and whispered, "And when he took me here, the only way you could convince him was telling him it would cause my parents more pain if I was alive."

He's...right. Harry stood abruptly, turning his back on him. They didn't speak for a while. Distracted, Harry barely heard Lucius standing.

"I thought you should know," he said softly, "that my father has always been struggling against Dragon Pox. Perhaps you noticed the markings on him? They are quiet similar in appearance to bruises. Well, no matter. Due to his...circumstances in the last few months, his sickness is now terminal."

Harry didn't answer, but Lucius hadn't expected him to. He reined in the desire to demand he respond and forced himself to exhale. Criticizing Harry was hardly going to make him partial to Lucius' position. He would need time to think by himself.

Instead, he opened the drawers of the wardrobe and picked out simple black robes, undergarments, and a loose shirt and pants before heading to the bathroom.

Water rained down from the shower. Harry was jerked out of his thoughts when a knock at the door sounded. Slowly, he twisted the handle, treating himself to the sight of a familiar blonde woman with sky-blue, dreamy eyes. "Luna?"

"Hello, Harry," she greeted.

Staring at her, Harry noticed that she seemed more focused and hardened. Just like everyone else here. But seeing this in her, in particular, caused sadness to well up inside him.

"H-Hadrian mentioned that you were here. I didn't know when I'd see you."

"As one of his arithmancers and an expert on the Hallows," Luna shrugged, "I've been immensely busy. I've actually come to escort you to the Alpha team meeting. And to ask if you think it would safer if the prisoner remained in his cell."

'The prisoner'. Was that all Lucius was to everyone here? He didn't even get the dignity of a name? "No, I haven't changed my mind. Why an Alpha team meeting," he asked instead. "I'm in Lambda."

As Harry threw on his Death Eater cloak and collected his mask, Luna replied, "After your performance, no one will accuse your

promotion as favoritism. The details will be in the meeting. However, I can tell you that Hadrian is briefing everyone on Endgame, a plan he and the Inner Circle had been working on for months. He wants you to be present for the occasion. It is certain to be...historic."

Coldness settled over him at the words, but he pushed it away, stepped outside, and locked the door. "The Hallows...what are they?"

For the next few minutes they walked and she explained the story of the Peverell brothers and the Hallows. She then elaborated on her role as a Will member, and how generations of her family had been a part of it. There was not supposed to be a Master of Death; the Will tried to keep anyone who might earn the title from abusing the power that came with it.

"We didn't know specifically what it did," she admitted. "Nargles...well, it's a bit of an inside joke to me when I talk about them. They are creatures that instinctively sense when someone is breaching the borders from one world to another. I suppose it's Nature's way of helping the Will."

"So what was Hadrian trying to do with these Hallows and what are they?"

"They are Hadrian's invisibility cloak, Slytherin's ring, and the wand that, until a few years ago, Dumbledore possessed. As for what we were trying to accomplish, well, we all thought that it would be a boon for the war effort if our soldiers could essentially become invincible. Hadrian thought that he could use the power the three Hallows gave him to travel to Death - the afterlife - and summon back the souls that were there to him."

"But then wouldn't he decide who lives and who dies? He'd be playing God."

"Until the war is over, yes..." She paused but continued after a moment. "I know he wanted to bring back his sister and his parents as well. It would be an interesting family reunion. They'd be so proud of what he's about to accomplish."

Harry froze as he considered the possibilities. I could meet my parents. I could meet the sister I never had. But then he tossed aside the notion. It would be wonderful if I could do that, but where would you draw the line? That sort of power...I wouldn't trust anyone with it.

"The afterlife is another dimension, Harry." Luna was still talking. "On our first attempt to use the Hallows, we went to the wrong dimension. Or would have, if you hadn't gone through in our place."

"So the Hallows give the ability," he summarized, "to travel to different worlds?"

"Precisely." She glanced at Harry's necklace. "The other me must have trusted you very much to have sent you here."

"We're pretty good friends."

Voices came from just ahead. Harry recognized the briefing room from before and stopped, knowing that he'd find a room full of Death Eaters on the other side.

"I'll see you later, Harry."

Harry nodded and placed the mask over his head.

"See Riddle?" Horcrux taunted as he lay eagle spread, curtsy of a petrificus totalis, on a curtained off section of the Hospital Wing. "Harry has become one of us now, just as I said he would. My counterpart was incredibly pleased."

Tom's eyes narrowed. He'd been coming every day to see if Andy had 'recovered', but all he seemed to gain for his efforts was insults from his possessor. "You haven't been receiving any mail nor been in contact with anyone. How would you know whether or not Harry became a Death Eater?"

The soul piece turned his gleaming eyes to him. "We are the same soul. Whenever Hadrian feels strongly, I see and feel the same from his perspective. I watched Harry bring in Yaxley, inbreed. I know."

The response left an icy feeling in his gut. The symptoms were disturbingly similar to his own visions regarding Hadrian. Far too similar for his comfort.

He forced himself to push it away. He whirled on his heel and left for the headmaster's office. Will killing the horcrux kill Andy? he wondered, picking up his pace without realizing it. They had managed to convince Andy that the Map had possessed him, but, to Tom's infinite infuriation, he pitied the horcrux more than been furious at it. Salazar...

Furthermore, the horcrux's control over the boy hadn't reduced. Constantly, Pomfrey was alerting Dumbledore when she suspected that Andy was no longer the one lying in her Hospital Wing, and the number of times she'd called hadn't dwindled significantly.

Bellatrix glanced up at him as he walked into the headmaster's office, her arms crossed as she hugged her dark robe closer around herself. "Is he any better?"

"No," Tom sighed, giving McGonagall a nod of acknowledgement just before she tossed green Floo powder into the fireplace and vanished. "Dumbledore hypothesizes that the bond between them depends not on the amount of affection they feel towards each other, but how much the victim pours his, shall we say, soul into the Map. He and the soul piece must have gotten along very well."

Bellatrix smoothed down her tresses and straightened the elegant, silvery dress she was wearing beneath her robes. Tom's jaw clenched. "Is anyone...special going to be there today?" His voice was noticeably cooler.

Her eyes flickered up to him. "Yes...Rodolphus has...returned from Germany."

"Really now?"

"Play nice, Tom," she murmured, cupping Floo in her hands and tossing it into the fire. Emerald flames leaped to life. "This is primarily an Order meeting, anyway."

He opened his mouth to tell her that Lestrangle didn't deserve her, but she had stepped into the hearth and vanished before he had the chance. Which is a good thing, he told himself. He'd already had this argument with her before and he wasn't going to have it again. He didn't want her to feel any worse about her mother's wishes than she already did.

Tom thrust the powder in, walked inside, and intoned, "Black Manor."

The flames consumed him and then vanished. He strode out of the fireplace and into a large room decorated with mahogany furniture and lit with tall candles, freezing upon seeing the man bringing Bella's hand to his lips. "You grow lovelier by the month," he purred.

Bellatrix answered with a tight smile. "Surely you can think of something else to say by now?" She kept her voice light. "I'm not a child, Rodolphus."

"I can see that..." He smirked.

Tom's lip curled before he forced his facial muscles to relax into one of indifference. "Rodolphus." A smile that did in no way reach his eyes wormed its way onto his lips.

"Tom." He returned the greeting with the same false smile. "I've heard you became Head Boy. Congratulations."

"I thank you, though I'm sure it's nothing compared to your success in Germany." It was a subtle, barbed insult, since Rodolphus had made a rather imprudent investment in his last trip to Berlin.

Bellatrix, sensing that the already tense atmosphere was about to become suffocating, suggested, "Why don't we let Dumbledore know we're here? I'm sure everyone is waiting..." Quickly, she gestured to the hall and the three of them proceeded in silence to the living room.

The moment her daughter came into view, Mrs. Black embraced her. "Bella, dear, welcome home. You look beautiful. I can always count

on Cissy's taste, can't I? Doesn't her dress bring out her eyes, Rodolphus?"

"Of course, Madam. Her eyes are especially striking tonight."

Now it was Bellatrix's turn to give a fake smile.

"Come, come, darling," she steered Rodolphus away. "Let's all sit down in the dining room. This day isn't all about reunions, after all."

Eyes locked onto the hand Rodolphus had put on Bella's back, Tom entered the dining room that's table was bereft of silverware and dinner, and sat between Bellatrix and the end of the table where Dumbleodre would sit. Rodolphus stole Lucius' usual chair.

As Dumbledore entered the room, his tired blue eyes lost their weariness and started to shine. Tom knew it was for the sake of his audience. "Welcome, everyone. I am glad all of you could come," he began. "Unfortunately, we have little time for pleasantries. There is much to be discussed." He unraveled a newspaper a few days old and placed it in front of him. "I'm sure the first issue on everyone's mind is this article."

'Dark Lord's Heir Makes Debut!' the title read in bold, gigantic print. No one needed to ask to see the article. They'd all read it at least three times already.

"Skeeter labels that boy as the 'Dragon Slayer'," someone finally spoke up. "She embellishes, but Skeeter wouldn't lie so blatantly about something like this. If that boy broke a dragon's neck, whether it was a young one or an old one, he must be a campeador."

Tom was the one who broke the silence that followed. "That doesn't necessarily mean that he's the Dark Lord's heir..."

"What difference does it make?" Mr. Lestrangle folded his arms across his chest. "The Dragon Slayer is a campeador and he's on the Dark Lord's side. What does it matter if he's related by blood or not?"



"If he's related by blood," his wife put in, "it might mean that there are more heirs or heiresses out there."

"That's-"

"Now see here-"

"If that happens, the war effort-"

Dumbledore interrupted by raising a hand. "I believe that Tom and I have information on the so-called Dragon Slayer that the Order should know."

Rodolphus eyed Tom. "Is he a relative of yours?"

"Excuse me?" he asked in irritation that was more because the man was talking to him than anything else.

"He's a parselmouth."

"He's not a relative. Headmaster, perhaps you should explain?" They would be less skeptical if he was the one to reveal Harry's circumstances instead of him, after all.

Nodding, Dumbledore confessed, "What I am about to say will be hard to believe for some of you. I ask that you keep an open mind and remember that, with magic, anything is possible." He waited until he saw agreement on their faces. "Several months ago, we received a visitor from an alternate dimension."

It was so quiet that Tom could have heard a piece of tissue drop. "An – an alternate universe?" Mr. Black repeated skeptically. "Albus, are you...certain?"

"As certain as I am of the fact that I have three middle names."

"...Do you have proof?"

"The person who performed the ritual to bring our visitor to this world is not on speaking terms with me and therefore I do not have proof, but there is irrefutable evidence that this is the case."

"I see. What is the name of this visitor?"

Dumbledore answered calmly, "Harry James Potter."

"What?"

"That is outrageous!"

The few Order members that were too young to have known or to have heard who Harry Potter was frowned in confusion. The rest were on their feet, composure gone despite years of upbringing to maintain it. "The Dark Lord's alternate self traveled to our dimension? If this is true, how can we possibly-"

"The Dark Lord did not travel to our dimension," Dumbledore stated firmly. "A seventeen year old who, in his world, is the Boy Who Lived, traveled to our dimension."

Druella, Bellatrix's mother, exclaimed, "That is preposterous! The Dark Lord – the Boy Who Lived? I would sooner believe that Tom here is the Dark Lord!"

Tom shifted uncomfortably. "Harry is from an alternate universe, Mrs. Black. I was with him constantly after we found him. Not only does he share the same campeador talent that Hadrian has, but he has the same underlying personality. He also saved the Slytherin students by showing us the location of the Chamber of Secrets, something no one in our world knows."

"Are you saying that he is the Dragon Slayer?"

"Then no matter where he originally came from, he's a Death Eater now!" Mr. Dolohov snarled. "The little monster probably thought he could up his position by becoming the Dark Lord's right hand! Dumbledore," he implored suddenly. "We must kill him. Who knows

what will happen? The boy is too much of a threat! If we leave him alive, he'll be there to take He Who Must Not Be Named's place-

"No!" Tom's outburst shocked everyone into silence. "I know Harry. He isn't Hadrian. He has proven himself time and time again."

"Then how," Alecko Carrow demanded, jabbing a finger at the newspaper, "do you explain that? Believe me when I say that I can buy into this alternate universe theory. Albus isn't a man easily fooled and there have always been times when certain things were thought to be impossible –Time Turners, for example. But the Dark Lord's younger version as a champion against injustice? Ha! He would like to think so, but that doesn't mean that he is."

"Do you think I," Tom whispered in a voice that sent warning signals blaring across the room, "am easily fooled, Carrow?" Carrow didn't have an answer to that.

Dumbledore placated, "I realize that this will be hard for you to believe, but I ask you to trust in our judgment. We started off with the same feelings you are having right now, and, as you can see, they've changed completely."

"Headmaster," Bellatrix told him before someone else could accuse Harry of what she was about to say, "some people may believe that Harry was manipulated into doing what he has, but I am certain that he isn't a Death Eater at heart. When Lucius and I were captured, he convinced the Dark Lord to spare our lives; I think any apparent Death Eater actions he's taken would only be to prevent something worse from happening."

Tom felt his muscles relax slightly. "Harry was staunchly against the Dark Arts or anything that might be considered Dark. It would take far more than three days for him to change his mind."

"In short," Dumbledore summarized, "if Harry can be extracted from Hadrian's grip, it would be in everyone's best interest to do so. If you cannot put aside your feelings, I ask you to tolerate him when we take him back."

"If we can take him back," Rodolphus snidely added under his breath. Dumbledore politely ignored him.

"The next topic on the agenda would be our predictions on Hadrian's movements. Based on his actions so far, I believe that he will attempt his coup d'état on the Ministry in a matter of months, if not weeks."

"Weeks?" Druella echoed.

"He has been systematically eliminating key figures in the Ministry and instituting wizards or witches with Death Eater ties or sympathies in their place."

"He can't," Bellatrix pointed out, "completely eliminate the Ministry's command structure at the moment, or he will have immense difficulty taking over. After he does, however...there might not even be a Ministry left."

Tom nodded, inwardly thinking that that might be a good thing if anyone found out about his blatant violation of the Ban on Experimental Breeding, which raising a cockatrice fell under. "With this latest move, it seems that Hadrian has purposely exposed the Magical World to the muggles." He stared at the article titled 'Scimgeour's Days Numbered?' and said, "Article 73 of the International Statue of Secrecy dictates that a Wizarding governing body will be disciplined by the International Confederation of Wizards if such a situation occurs. The International Community could choose whatever punishment they desire, and our Minister is not popular with them."

As a room full of mostly politicians, the adults understood the significance of what he was saying. "They will likely force the Department Heads to assign a new Minister."

"There would be pressure," Dumbledore reminded, "for them to choose Cedric Diggory."

Tom considered, thinking of Harry, "Hadrian isn't that subtle. He'd want to do this with a bang. If Diggory was voted in, he wouldn't let him keep his power. He would want everyone to know the truth - that

he is the one in charge. I'm more inclined to believe that he will take over and use the International Community's ire to legitimize his rule alongside his other propaganda."

"Then what should we be looking out for?"

It was then that a knock on the door sounded. Raising his eyebrows, Dumbledore said, "Come in."

A nervous house-elf fiddled with her fingers and gave a deep curtsy. "Libby is sorry, mistresses. Libby thought that Mistress Druella would like to know..."

"Know what?" Druella stood.

"There is...is a ghost in front of the manor's wards, mistress. A ghost of a stag. Libby has tried to make it go away, but it will not."

Tom's frown only increased when Dumbledore also stood, his eyes twinkling. "The ghost of a stag? Does it say anything?"

Libby bobbed her head up and down. "Aye, it does, sir! But Libby is not understanding...it hisses at Libby most loudly!"

"Tom," Dumbledore instructed. "Come with me."

"Sir?"

"Quickly, Tom. I don't believe that our apparition is a ghost, but a patronus."

Following quickly, Tom questioned, "A patronus? Why would that be here? There aren't – surely there aren't any dementors-"

"No, no, my boy," Dumbledore replied jovially. "Nothing of the sort. You see, in my spare time, I've been experimenting with a spell that modifies the patronus, allowing it to verbally send a message from the sender to the receiver."

"You haven't told anyone about that before," Tom pointed out as Dumbledore opened the front doors and started across the cobblestone path to the entrance of the estate. "So how would anyone be able to send you a message? At least, I don't think you have..."

"I haven't. There are still a few glitches I haven't quite worked out, and none of the Order currently knows how to cast a corporeal patronus. My counterpart, on the other hand, may have."

"Harry," Tom breathed. "He would have been taught how to perform the spell."

"Yes, and if the stag is hissing, I can only assume that this message is strictly for your ears."

The stag gracefully trotted up and down the gates to Black Manor, crystalline and luminous under the moonlight. Tom approached, unsure of what to do. The stag shook its head, pawing the ground impatiently.

Slowly, he came close enough that he could have reached out and touched it. The stag sniffed his hand, seemed to deem him worthy, and opened its mouth. "Tom," it hissed. "I don't know how long I can say this – they're watching my every move. This message might not even make it past the wards around Headquarters, but since my magic registers as Hadrian's, it probably will. In case it does, listen carefully: I've just come back from an Alpha Team meeting. Hadrian is planning to attack the Ministry seven days from now at nine at night. I don't know all the details, but it sounds like there's going to be a lot of damage. He's calling his plan 'Endgame', enough said." Tom stepped back without realizing it, blood draining from his face. "I've got to go now – but just so you know, Lucius is alright and Hadrian confirmed the alternate universe theory – bye." The message ended.

Tom stared at the stag as it dissolved, processing Harry's words.

"Tom?"

"In seven days," he heard himself say, "Hadrian is going to stage his coup." In seven days, the Prophecy may be completed...and 'neither can live while the other survives'.

A/N: I know...it's been far too long since I've updated. Far too long. I'm sure someone out there is curious about/will be amused by my lame excuses, so I'll confess. I was having trouble with the end of this story, and since at this point these chapters are leading up to the end, I couldn't really post them because the finish would be lousy. However, I've sorted everything out, and I know what's going to happen from here onwards. Another big reason though, was the fact that this new story idea hit me and I honestly couldn't think of anything else but it. I spent a lot of time writing/planning out that story (for any of you who want to know, it's a Harry Potter/Star Wars crossover) - sorry!

Given how long it was since the last update, I'm not going to answer all the wonderful reviews you all gave me. I do want to thank everyone who did review because your comments encouraged me to stop being so lazy and write :)

The next update will not take four months; I promise.

## Chapter Sixteen

"I don't understand what we're doing," Harry muttered as Hadrian gave the hostess of the decadently upper class restaurant a cold smile and followed her to one of the tables. He glanced back at the Doberman Pinscher that wagged its' almost nonexistent tail at him once he caught him looking. To his ultimate unease, Yaxley was holding Ron's leash, dark sunglasses on his face and unnaturally calm, the effects of the Imperius that the Dark Lord had cast over him. It seemed that, for some reason, Hadrian was forcing Yaxley to pretend to be blind.

He turned back to Hadrian as he spoke. "It's really quite simple, Harry." The woman smiled brilliantly at him and gestured to a seat.

"Would you like any wine, sirs?"

"Yes," Hadrian answered, giving her the name of a brand Harry was certain was expensive. "Harry will have a banana milkshake...with chocolate sprinkles."

Harry's head snapped up in surprise. "You know my favorite..? Oh. Right." He would.

"I'll be right back with your orders." Lingering just a bit too long at their table to stare at Hadrian, she gave another smile and quickly went off to serve her customer. Harry would have grinned if he didn't know how much the Dark Lord loathed Muggles; instead, he pitied her.

"We're here almost two hours early." He tried to hide his nervousness, wishing that he'd asked Lucius what body language gave it away. They couldn't have found him out, could they?

"You don't believe that I want to treat you?"

Harry found himself swallowing incredulous laughter at the innocent tone, which was almost blasphemous coming from Hadrian's mouth.



"I might have found it weird if Yaxley and Ron weren't here...well, they're not there anymore, anyway. But I can't believe it at all since they were. Why would you take Yaxley out to dinner? Or wherever he's going?"

"Oh, he's going out to dinner, alright." The smile twisting his lips caused Harry to shiver. "All of the Inner Circle are, actually. It's just a shame that Ron had to have such poor company...and that he will only have table scrapes."

Harry's brow scrunched up. Hadrian didn't look like he was about to slaughter Harry for treachery. So what was all this about?

The waitress returned, probably to deliver their drinks, but Harry thought it was more likely to gawk. "Thank you," Harry said because he knew Hadrian wouldn't.

"You're welcome. I'll be back for your orders."

"Must you encourage her?" Hadrian asked idly, taking a sip of his wine, which was cupped in a long-necked glass. "Delicious. Though I wouldn't expect any less from Elysium; it is one of London's finest. Needless to say, it's a treat that neither of us were lavished with under the care of those disgusting relatives of ours. Would you like a taste?"

"No thank you," Harry forced himself to answer in a passably calm voice. "Thanks for taking me here." He paused and then added for good measure, "The Dursley's took me to London once. I remember looking up at this place and wishing I could eat here."

"I remember." A small smile curved the older man's lips. "They did the same to me."

"But I guess that doesn't matter. They're not around right now."

"True." He glanced at one of the waiters strolling around the room, balancing three plates in his hands. "Filet mignon, Harry?"

Harry's eyes widened slightly. "Are you sure? That's an expensive dish, isn't it?"

"The Potters were hardly bereft of money, Harry. They were among the wealthiest families in Wizarding Britain."

"Oh...alright then."

Suddenly the waiter, who was heading towards an elderly couple at the other end of the room, stopped. His eyes glassed over and he turned, heading towards them. It didn't take a genius to guess that he was under a silent Imperius curse. Tensing despite his resolve to remain outwardly calm, Harry held his breath as the woman set the filet mignon in front of him.

"Bring us the check, will you?" Hadrian spoke the command out loud. The waiter mindlessly walked away without even bothering to deliver the other dishes to whoever had ordered them.

If it had been a week or so ago, Harry would have fidgeted. However, he knew what he had to do now and had prepared himself to do it. He accepted the flagrant use of the Unforgivables, knowing he had to appear unbothered. "So why are we here, really?" He cut up the first slice of his stolen food and chewed, the rich taste exploding over his taste buds.

"To begin our steps to obliterate the Ministry, of course." He pointed to the building constructed on top of the underground Wizarding governmental building. "There are restaurants on that structure," he indicated four others near it, "and those. At least one Inner Circle member is in each. Once the time is right, they will pull the fire alarms, causing everyone inside to rush out of the building and onto the streets. Ron and Yaxley will have gone before that into the Ministry. Now, what do you think will happen once the aurors see a man that is Vitruvius Yaxley in a just noticeable disguise sneaking into the Ministry?"

“They’ll stop him,” Harry answered. “They’ll check him for a wand and bring him up to the Auror Office. I’d say they’d test him for spells on his person in an interrogation room.”

“Exactly. Do you know what level the Auror Office is?”

“Second.”

“Yes. The second floor...the one directly below what passes as the Executive Branch of the Wizarding World’s offices.” Hadrian elaborated, “Of course, since Ron is with Yaxley, he’ll be taken to the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures to be checked out. He’ll revert back to his human form in the elevator, take out his captors, and return back to the surface.”

Harry took another bite and frowned. “Alright, I’m following.”

“Yaxley has the latest Technomagic products strapped to his chest beneath his clothes, though none of these have been released to the public.”

An ominous feeling crawled into Harry’s chest. “What are they?”

“There is a long, technical explanation I could give you, but...they basically serve the same purpose as bombs.” Harry choked. “They’ve been adapted to function in a magically saturated environment. They won’t be perfect, but they’ll get the job done. Luna has outdone herself.”

“So,” Harry extrapolated faintly, “you’re going to use Yaxley as a suicide bomber?”

“Precisely. Neville, as Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, knows all the aurors’ shifts. It took a bit of reassigning over a period of time – we couldn’t make it obvious we were doing it – but now almost every auror in the Ministry at nine o’clock is either a pureblood or a half-blood raised solely in a magical environment. You know how wizards and witches like them are; they’ll dismiss what Yaxley’s wearing as Muggle garments. When Yaxley activates the

bombs, the first, second, and third floor, along with a large part of the building on top of the Ministry, will be annihilated. The debris will fall down and likely damage, if not take out, the forth as well.”

At this point, Harry was staring unseeingly at the table in front of him, trying not to panic. His heartbeat thundered in his chest so violently that he attributed it to divine intervention that Hadrian didn't hear it. Cold sweat had broken out over his body. “Y-you're going to kill all of those people..?”

Hadrian's eyes narrowed a fraction. “The Ministry is corrupt and under the control of inbred swine. We don't want the litters of spawn they may produce contaminating the magical gene pool. That Gaunt boy is just the first example.”

Harry stamped down the automatic urge to defend Tom. He wasn't delusional; he knew that if Hadrian suspected his loyalties lay elsewhere, his treatment of Harry would do a 180 flip.

That realization started him because it caused him to realize something else. While Hadrian might be able to understand Harry completely, Harry was able to understand Hadrian completely, too. It hadn't occurred to him because he wanted Hadrian to be a benevolent Dark Lord. He hadn't wanted to acknowledge that such a dark part of him existed. And, for a while, he'd fooled himself into thinking that was the case.

Now, it was time to get over that. Harry looked inside himself without flinching, admitting that just like everyone else, he had his own dose of evil. He knew as he examined himself that if he didn't restrain himself at all, he could be as kind as he was cruel. He tended to put people into two categories: friends or enemies. It was like a flipped switch when someone went from one group to the other; if Harry/Hadrian was betrayed, there would be no end to his/their fury.

So why am I here with him now? It dawned on him that if he was Hadrian, he would honestly like Harry. However, he would need undeniable proof of his loyalty. If Harry was participating in such an important mission, which, although no one would question it, was still unexpected, it would be because this was Harry's test.

He wants me to choose today. Harry eyed Hadrian. There is going to be some point where he'll force me to decide, once and for all, in front of everyone, who I stand with.

He thought of a subtle way of asking why the time had changed and asked, "Where should I be? Should I portkey back to the Manor to meet Alpha Team just before nine or am I attacking with you as soon as the Ministry is destroyed? I'm a bit confused with the whole time change thing."

"The Death Eaters are attacking at nine," Hadrian told him. "But the 'festivities' begin before. I will have Alpha Team portkey in front of the building we are in now, in fact, just before nine. Everyone should have already evacuated by then. We will use the people on the streets as cover to infiltrate the Ministry."

"But the Statute of Secrecy...it will be blown again. And the Muggles might get caught in the crossfire."

"I highly doubt it. They will flee once they see the fight ensuing. If they don't...well, that's just Social Darwinism." Hadrian regarded him. "You disapprove?"

Harry twitched. Then, realizing he had, knew he couldn't deny it. "I don't like anything that involves a lot of death..."

"It is interesting," the Dark Lord mused. "The younger me would not have found what we're about to do so objectionable." Harry held his breath. "But I suppose our upbringing was markedly different. After all, you are the Boy Who Lived in your world." His eyes glinted thoughtfully.

Harry let out a breath that would be hard to detect even to his counterpart's hearing. You don't know just how much that is. He was thinking of Harry as his younger version - a young Hadrian. If you did otherwise...I probably wouldn't be on this mission.

How was he going to get out of this mess? Dumbledore, Tom, and the Order should be at the Ministry – but it would be too late by then.

What if they thought that the patronus' message was a trap? What if they believed that he'd defected?

Don't think like that, he coached himself. You have to hope. It's the only thing you have left.

"Tell me, Harry." Harry looked up. "Are you curious as to what happened to those revolting, so-called relatives of ours?"

"Yeah. I saw it when I first got to this dimension. There wasn't anyone around, and the house is for sale." He managed to smirk slightly. "And it's unbelievably underpriced, too."

Hadrian grinned before brushing a hand through his hair. "I appreciate you telling me, though it wouldn't be a surprise, considering how they met their ends."

Harry's hand faltered on its way to his milkshake. "What do you mean?"

"I came back to that dump when I was nineteen," the Dark Lord told him, leaning back with a contented sigh. "Those blasted Dursley's had been abusing us since childhood, and I vowed to get revenge. Of course previously, age restrictions and the low amount of wizards in Little Whinging made it impossible to off them without being incarcerated."

Harry almost spat out his milkshake. Was he serious?

One look at the older wizard's face told him he was. But...I...I had always loathed the Dursley's, but I never seriously considered...not like he's doing. I mean, I did occasionally, but it wasn't like I was going to carry them out. They were just...things I did when I was angry. When Dudley hit me, or when Petunia insulted my mum...

“You remember the complications, don’t you?” Hadrian continued. “The Ministry monitors sectors and can’t home into individual wands. The general area gives an indication of who performed underage magic. Naturally, there were very few magical folk in Little Whinging, with Arabella Figg, a squib, as an exception. Now, if she had been a wizard, it could have been done. Who would have suspected us of killing them off? After all, they were our only relatives...”

The green eyed boy’s mind whirled. He wasn’t going to say what he thought he was going to say, was he?

“I cast a Body Binding curse on all of them, then I put dear Petunia under Imperius and had her put her kitchen knives to good use on that whale of a boy.” He examined his wine glass before adding, “I healed him, of course. I wouldn’t want to give him the relief of such a quick end. I played with her for a bit, using Legilimency, and a few other creative tortures. I would have put her under the Cruciatus for a bit longer, but I didn’t want her thrown into insanity. After all, she was blood, no matter what a traitor she was.”

Harry watched in morbid fascination and horror as he described their ends. Flashes of their faces zipped through his mind as Hadrian spoke.

“I dealt her a swift death by the Killing Curse and turned to the other two. Now those,” a sneer curled his lips, “I tortured to insanity. They didn’t deserve mercy.”

It was unnervingly silent as Hadrian closed his eyes in remembrance. He opened them and speculated, “I suspect those two are still in Bedlam, babbling incoherently. A fitting punishment for their crimes, don’t you think?” Harry didn’t answer. “Harry?”

“O-oh. Yes.” Swallowing, he forced himself to smile. It probably looked like a demented version of one. “Very appropriate.” And then he started laughing, and he couldn’t stop. He knew he was laughing hysterically out of pure horror, but Hadrian took it to be something else.

“Cheers,” he smiled, holding up his milkshake. “To our former, wretched family. I knew you would approve.” Harry was still laughing too hard to answer. He still couldn’t tell what horrified him more: that this was all said with relish, or that he had killed them. He had actually killed them. And this time, he couldn’t tell if he was referring to himself, or Hadrian.

Dumbledore’s words floated into his mind: ‘It’s not how you are the same, but how you are different’.

“Different...” he murmured.

“Pardon?”

“Nothing...I just realized how right that was.”

“I don’t see anything,” Bellatrix whispered, surveying the area. “Maybe Hadrian wasn’t testing Harry. Maybe the attack really is at nine.”

Tom didn’t answer. They were sitting across from each other in a café, looking through the window at the visitor’s entrance to the Ministry. Rodolphus was probably having convulsions. Tom was secretly basking in the image.

Dumbledore had reasoned that Hadrian was unlikely to use the employees’ entrance, since that meant that all the Death Eaters that came would have to work in the Ministry. Unless they had managed to create or procure a large number of special Ministry coins, which were used to enter...but Hadrian usually took the simple route, so that wasn’t much of a concern.

All of them had realized, however, that if they announced an evacuation of the Ministry, Harry’s cover would be blown. Furthermore, Hadrian might delay the attack, making their information worthless.



Hopefully, with the Order waiting for Tom and Bellatrix's signal via the Chocolate Frog cards to apparate to the Ministry, any Death Eaters scouting the area wouldn't be suspicious until it was too late.

Tom looked at her, biting his lip. Then he realized what he was doing and stopped. He really shouldn't even think about doing this, but...

As casually as possible, he asked, "Would you like something to drink while we're waiting?"

"Hmm?" was the distracted reply. "Oh, no, thanks. I'm not really thirsty." She squinted through the window. Tom tried not to feel like he'd just been shot down. "Wait...is that Yaxley?"

"Yaxley?" He leaned forward, pseudo-rejection forgotten. A thin man with dark sunglasses was leading a reddish dog on a leash, a jacket wrapped around its middle proclaiming it a guide dog. Tom's eyes roved over the trademark goatee Yaxley had been famous for and then at the dog. "Does that dog..?"

"Look familiar?" Bellatrix finished as she stood, hand already wrapped around her wand. "Oh yes it does. It's Weasley."

"Salazar," Tom cursed and stood as well.

Bellatrix quickly swept out of the café, stopping at the entrance as Yaxley and Weasley stepped into the phone booth that passed as the visitor's entrance. The booth's floor descended and Bellatrix threw off the leather jacket she'd been wearing. "We better put robes over our Muggle clothes," she advised, opening the large hand bag she'd hooked over her arm and pulling out black robes.

Tom threw a similar one from his briefcase over his turtleneck and banished the case and her hand bag. The two of them ran over to the Visitor's Entrance and rapidly dialed the password. "Preventing a coup," Bellatrix told the bodiless voice once it asked their purpose of visit. Tom sighed as she smirked and they found themselves been dropped down into the ninth floor of the Ministry.

They walked out, scanning the sea of heads for Yaxley. It wasn't difficult to find him. A few people were already giving him odd looks as he passed by. Tom walked up to the security check in.

"Hello," a bored man doodling on his notepad greeted mechanically. "Name and wand."

"We have reason to believe that that man over there is Vitruvius Yaxley under the Imperius Curse," Tom said without preamble. "The dog he has with him is almost certainly Ronald Weasley in his animagus form."

An annoyed expression crossed the man's features. "Now see here, the Ministry is no place for jokes – Mr. Riddle?"

It's amazing, Tom reflected as the man hurried to call in the aurors on duty, what a single scar can do. He watched, triumph beginning in his chest, when the aurors marched up and dragged Yaxley away to the Auror Office after depriving him of his wand. Weasley was Stunned and another pair of aurors levitated his prone body to the Wizengamot courts just below their current level.

"Well," Tom remarked as they walked to the Floo. "That was easy."

"Too easy," Bella returned darkly. "This can't be it."

"...What do you think is going to happen?"

"I don't know. Call me paranoid, but I almost feel like Hadrian wanted this to happen. He must have known that sending Yaxley, who everyone knows was captured by Death Eaters, into the public would be a mistake."

Tom stopped. "Merlin! You're right – if he really didn't want Yaxley to be recognized, he would have put him under glamours or Polyjuice!"

"We have to warn someone-"

“Wait!” He checked the watch he was wearing. “It’s thirty minutes until Alpha Team is supposed to attack. Even if we did manage to convince everyone to evacuate, it wouldn’t be enough time to get them out. Not to mention that Hadrian would see them coming and call off the attack.”

Bellatrix paced. “There has to be a reason why Weasley is here. He probably came to confirm that Yaxley was taken away...but any Death Eater in the Ministry could do that. It isn’t like it’s a problem if they’re there for the attack. They’d portkey away as soon as the Dark Mark was shot into the atrium.”

“Unless they aren’t here,” Tom realized. “Unless they had all the Death Eaters evacuate.”

“Then Hadrian doesn’t have anyone to tell him that something went wrong.” Her attention traveled to the siren above her. “Informants outside are only a problem if the Ministry workers go into the streets. What if we made an announcement via the paper planes the Departments use to have everyone Floo home?”

“It will take too long to convince everyone to send the planes.”

Bellatrix fingered her wand, eyeing the security guard speculatively. “I know.”

He followed her line of sight. “What exactly,” he whispered, “are you suggesting?”

She hesitated before turning to face him. “The Imperius.”

“Excuse me?” he repeated in alarm. “No, you can’t-”

“We can’t afford the time it takes to persuade everyone in the security division to listen, then tell a higher up, who will want to hear it directly from us, explain again, wait until they talk to their boss, and etcetera.” She gave him a pointed look. “I know you’re no angel, Tom. You aren’t rejecting this idea out of principle. I’m not afraid to get my hands dirty if it means saving lives.”

“ ... You’ve never performed that particular curse before,” he reminded, eyes darting around to see if anyone was watching, though he knew they would hardly be able to hear him.

“Neither have you, but I’ve heard that this spell is more about will than anything else. Get Dumbledore. I’ll have our oh-so-enthusiastic watchman open the door to the security room for us.”

Reluctantly, Tom agreed, yanking out the card from his pocket. Bellatrix started ahead. He saw her frowning in concentration and whispering the spell. The security guard suddenly stood. Bellatrix motioned Tom forward.

“Dumbledore,” Tom told the card as the security guard opened the door for them. The dimly lit room was occupied by two junior aurors, who floundered uncertainly when they saw them.

“They’re not supposed to be here?” the first told them.

“They’re good,” Bellatrix’s temporary puppet waved them off. “Take a break, you two.”

“Oh...ok.” Eagerly, they hurried out. Tom took out his wand and Stunned the security guard, who slumped to the floor.

“Nice work.”

“Thank you,” she smiled. “Is Dumbledore there?”

“He will be in a moment.” As he said the words, the man’s face appeared in the card. “Headmaster, we are trying to evacuate the Ministry. We think the attack is going to happen any minute now. Yaxley and Weasley entered just a few minutes ago.”

Dumbledore, trusting Tom’s judgment, didn’t ask for details about the first issue. “Do you feel that we should come now?”

“The security office door is open. We strongly believe that there are no Death Eaters currently present in the Ministry. If you proceed into it, we can update you there.”

“Very well.” He nodded and vanished.

Bellatrix had finished scribbling a note informing the office and Department heads that an emergency drill would be taking place in five minutes and that everyone should Floo home and return in an hour. Hopefully by then, the Order would have disconnected the Ministry from the Floo network.

“Gemino,” Tom ordered and the planes duplicated. “This isn’t going to be foolproof. Some of the Department heads are going to wonder why they weren’t given advanced notice. They’ll start asking questions...some might not even leave or let other leave until they have answers.”

Bellatrix, as a person who had spent quite a lot of time in the Ministry due to her father’s position in the Wizengamot before he was killed, knew how to spell the planes. She sent them flying through the door as she copied more. “I know, but there’s nothing we can do. I can’t claim it’s from the Minister – they know his signature.”

Tom closed his eyes and sat down next to her. “I can’t help but feel,” he murmured, “that there is a terrible reason why no one but people on our side is here.”

“So do I...”

Suddenly, an enormous tremor rippled through the building.

Tom and Bellatrix shot each other one glance before rushing out of the room. Wizards and witches were standing around in complete confusion. Some were afraid but others dismissed it as some sort of experiment gone wrong.

Tom decided to enlighten them. “Sonorous. Attention! Everyone is to report to the Floo. The Ministry will be closed for the next two hours. I repeat: everyone is to report to the Floo!”

A flood of people streamed forwards the fireplaces, but some were eying Tom and Bellatrix with suspicion. That stopped once the golden masked figures wearing robes so red they could be black began pouring out of the elevators and stairs.

Tom swore as spells began spraying the crowd. It was as if Hadrian had grown an entire legion of Death Eaters and set them loose in the Ministry.

“We can’t fight them all!” Bellatrix called out as she ran, blasting the nearest Death Eater aside and throwing a shield over a person to her right a second later.

Merlin help us. Tom gritted his teeth. Dumbledore better be here soon.

Harry smashed his elbow into an auror’s irate face and immediately followed up with a Stunner. He shoved him into the corner to save him from being crushed by the onslaught of human bodies and sent a wide-ranged Disarming spell in front of him like a tidal wave, a trick Hadrian had taught him. Wands were ripped out of the hands of the people before him, arcing into the air.

Some random Beta Team Death Eater sent a jet of fire into the sky, turning them to ash. Inwardly, Harry winced, feeling the loss of the wands as if they were his own. “One through Fourteen!” he bellowed. “Go around the corner! Attack their flank!” The Beta Team Death Eaters instantly obeyed, not knowing how much the words tasted like acid in their new leader’s throat.

Ron hadn’t returned to give them the signal, but Yaxley had blown the bombs anyway. Hadrian had assigned Ron’s personal team to Harry until they found him, reasoning that Harry worked better solo anyway, Beta One had never had any leadership experience, and Harry’s obvious campeador talents and power would cause them to believe in him.

“Expelliarmus!” he tossed out and muttered to himself, “I really hope no one in the Order sees me now.” With the red bindi stamped on his golden mask and a number and Beta symbol absent from his forehead, he looked every bit the Inner Circle Death Eater.

Screams and shouts revealed that Beta One through Fourteen had met with success. Swallowing the guilt lodged in his throat, he tore ahead and mowed down the next two people running in his direction.

Anti-apparation wards had gone up a long time ago. Alpha Team, he recalled as he dodged a spell, are on level four and above, checking for survivors.

And making sure they didn’t stay survivors for long.

“Augmenti! Glacius!” The hall in front of him was inundated with water that froze at once, causing people to slip and become dazed upon impact with the floor. Harry systematically Stunned each one and used a Levitation Charm to brush them to the side. The Death Eaters could kill whoever they attacked; he knew even he, with his new position, couldn’t stop that. The order to kill came from Hadrian himself.

However, Harry wasn’t about to do the same, no matter how much trouble he’d get in. Now that the Department of Magical Law Enforcement had been utterly destroyed and all the aurors along with it, there were only a handful of decent fighters on each level.

With all the training the Death Eaters had had, it was a massacre. Like cutting through butter, he compared in disgust. For once in his life, he actually wanted to lose a duel. If he did though, no one would believe it, and he didn’t want to risk that when he didn’t even know if the Order would be here for him.

Harry cast an incendio on the floor, cutting a safe pathway through the ice to the next room.

Debris had fallen from the ceiling and caked its floor. A broken pipe gushed water from above onto the ground, causing the plaster from the damaged walls to congeal. A statue of a wizard loomed in the corner. The lights on the other side had stopped working; a dark mist swathed through the door to the adjacent room.

It was eerily quiet. Harry stopped walking as he examined the mist, his instincts whispering a warning. "Beta Two and Sixteen; I was told that you were familiar with this floor's layout."

"Yes, sir."

"Beta Two, take Beta Fifteen through Twenty Seven and enter from the left of that room. Beta Sixteen – take the rest and enter from the right. I will enter from here," he indicated the half-concealed entrance, whose door was lying on the ground.

"Yes, sir."

As they left, Harry swished his wand, casting a *lumos* into the mist, which began to dissipate. A young man he couldn't discern due to the darkness strode through, his steps calm and confident.

Harry fired off a spell and his opponent sent it veering off into the wall right next to Harry's face; it detonated, sending plaster hurling in his direction. A chunk rammed him in the side of the stomach; Harry had just managed to move in time to stop it from winding him.

Looks like this guy is no junior auror. He winced as his ribs throbbed in protest. Slamming his eyes shut to avoid being blinded by the sudden dust, Harry ran across the room, shooting random spells in the man's direction until he felt the air clear. He spun out of the path of an unidentifiable aqua spell and fired an overpowered *bombarda* at the man's feet.

A shield designed to block solid objects protected him from the spell's results, but Harry had already started bombarding his sides, where the shield did not reach. His opponent hissed in pain but quickly



recovered, Banishing the tiles flying in his face and making them reappear above Harry's head.

Inwardly cursing, Harry jumped out of the way and sent the debris on the floor soaring towards the man. His opponent retaliated by transfiguring them into flower petals and throwing curse after curse, causing Harry to rapidly transfigure a piece of the former ceiling into a large physical shield and slam it down in front of him.

The spells seemed to be designed for effect against organic creatures; the shield shuddered but absorbed the magic. Harry decided that the gloves were going to come off after that insight. Whoever it was clearly wanted to do more than just Stun him, and Harry preferred survival tactics over a held back self-defense.

He hurled the shield at the man, who managed to stumble out of the way, and transfigured tiles into mini blades. They catapulted across the room and were stopped by the sudden appearance of the statue that had been in the corner.

Despite being skewered, it ran over to Harry and tried to punch him.

Harry almost laughed. He blocked the hit and introduced it to one of his own. The statue shattered. From the lack of reaction from his opponent, Harry guessed that he was too busy dodging and thinking of other possible ways to cause his demise to have noticed.

"Avis Oppugno!" Harry growled and birds flew in the man's direction.

"Confringo!"

"Ruptispectis!"

"Deprimo!"

Harry voted to play with his strengths and close the distance between them. Another spell met his protego maximus; Harry clenched his teeth and struggled to maintain it. Over the lurid light of his

opponent's spell, he could see that he was having just as much trouble as he was.

Harry dropped to the ground, the spell flying over him, and flipped back onto his feet. Who is this guy? Unbeknownst to him, his opponent was thinking the same.

Neither of them was leaving. The battle had become one of pride as well.

"Diffindo!" The pipe was cut in half. Harry Summoned it to his hand and transfigured it into a durable metal pole. Swinging the pole in one hand and his wand in the other, he charged at his opponent.

What the blazes-? Tom flung another spell at the Inner Circle scum, forcing him to halt and defend. Magic electrified the air; waves of power sent intense vibrations in the ground.

It was a battle of sheer, raw power, and, while Tom seemed to have more of that, the Death Eater was a better duelist, causing them to come to an impasse.

Tom backed away towards the room he had just come out of, creating more distance between them. Harry broke off and chased after him. The floor froze in front of him and he tripped, skidding forward. Rapidly, he converted the momentum into a slide and managed to avoid the Entrail-Expelling Curse launched at him.

A flame spell melted the ice and he jumped to his feet, dodging away three other spells in quick succession.

Tom gaped as the Death Eater employed the pole like a bat, knocking the Blood Boiling Curse away as if it were a baseball. How-? No, concentrate!

In less than a heartbeat after that feat, lightning rushed at Harry, but the Gryffindor wasn't going to waste time trying to deflect it. Instead, he dodged.

Learning quickly, are we? Tom shot a spell at the pole in the Death Eater's hand, which shuddered and morphed into a viper.

The Death Eater let out a yell of surprise and snatched the snake's head just before it sunk its fangs into his arm. Tom's eyes widened. It couldn't be-?

Harry threw the snake back at his opponent, forcing the man to teeter out of the way and Banish the furious serpent. There were very few people he knew who could duel this well...was it a coincidence that he had chosen a snake of all things to attack him with?

Merlin! Why is he so bloody fast? More and more, Tom was convinced that this was actually Harry he was fighting. But it couldn't be – Harry wasn't an Inner Circle Death Eater. He hadn't joined with Hadrian!

Or had he?

The Death Eater was advancing far too close for Tom's liking. He backed away further until the two of them had entered the next room. If it was Harry, the light was dim enough that he wouldn't realize who he was fighting until it was too late.

Which would be just marvelous. Taking his attention away from the rapidly advancing Death Eater to concentrate, he gathered a reducto in his hands, containing the spell. Alright – forget that. It's time for a risk. It was something he had been working on outside of his Arithmancy class but hadn't completely perfected. If the Death Eater wasn't going to get in a power struggle anymore, he had to get more resourceful. I can't lose this.

I won't, Harry vowed, lose this.

The Death Eater brought down his wand – Tom released the spell.

A force exploded from the man's hands and blasted Harry into the air. Recalling what Hadrian had done in a similar situation, he tried to ignore his screaming, empty lungs and flipped backwards, landing easily on his feet.

Sucking in breath, he scrutinized his opponent from afar. That spell...I've only seen it used in one other place.

How did he do that? Tom demanded. It couldn't be – he wouldn't..?

Neither of them moved, both catching their breaths and unsure of whether to attack. Asking the questions they wanted could mean getting a false answer and falling for a trick.

Suddenly, Harry rushed forward and hurled out a spell. Tom started the incantation for a shield but changed his mind at the last minute. He knew how he could test whether it was Harry or not.

Harry raised his eyebrows when he heard the incantation to a Hair-Thickening Charm shouted at him and a jet of light collided with his spell. A gasp escaped him when the two solidified, the light shifting into a pure gold.

Priori Incantatem. Harry broke the connection, letting the spell catapult past him. "Tom?"

"Harry! What are you – why are you dressed like that?" He walked towards him, disgustedly eying his robes and mask. "You haven't – you haven't really joined them, have you?"

"Of course not!" Harry snapped, wrenching off his mask. "I can't believe you even have to ask!"

"Well forgive me," he snapped right back, "but it's hard not to wonder when you're dressed like an Inner Circle member and command your own squadron! A regular Death Eater, I could understand, but-"

"Sir!" Both boys' heads whirled to Beta Two and Sixteen, tailed by their divisions of the Beta Team, as they streamed into the room from opposite sides. Twenty Seven wands pointed at Tom, who stiffened.

Bollocks! Harry swore. His little trap was all well and good if this had been anybody else – winning quickly and efficiently meant less loss of lives. But now that Tom was here...he couldn't let Hadrian have him.

Harry glanced at the floor. If he could get close enough to Tom, he could blast it and they'd fall down to the story below – but that might mean breaking a leg or two and killing anyone below them. That option's definitely out. But what are you going to do?

Then he remembered the portkey necklace dangling over his chest. But it's two-way – the only place I can take him is directly to Headquarters!

"Harry," came a low Parseltongue hiss that no one else would be able to hear. "Priori Incantatem. Use the portkey. We're going to free the prisoners."

"Orders, sir?"

"...Stand down. He's mine," Harry uttered the cliché. "I will bring him back to Headquarters. Beta One is in charge."

Confused but unwilling to question a superior, the Death Eaters didn't voice their opinions. Harry raised his wand and nonverbally cast a harmless spell and Tom answered with an equally benign one. The golden light linked the two of them, drawing exclamations of surprise from their cloaked audience.

Harry slowly stepped forward and Tom let Harry's end of the spell draw closer to him. Phoenix song trilled in the air.

He reflected that it was extremely difficult, when experiencing priori incantatem, to pretend to not want a spell to hit you when you did. As Harry drew closer, he ground out, "I sincerely hope that the spell you used has no ill side effects."

"Don't worry," Harry assured. "It's just a simple Daydream Charm."

“What?” he sounded alarmed but had no time to condemn Harry’s choice of spell when it hit him. Immediately, a wistful expression and a smile Harry was rather unnerved to see on his normally serious face appeared.

Harry reached forward and pulled Tom towards him. “Home,” he ordered the portkey trapped between them. The familiar sensation of having his navel tugged began and Harry suddenly found himself thrown to the floor of Potter Manor.

“Ugh,” he groaned. Tom didn’t respond. “Tom, wake up!” He frowned. Based on the power he’d put into it, the spell was only supposed to last for half a minute, but thirty seconds was an eternity when time was of the essence. “Tom! Tom!” He shook him.

He heard him mumble ‘Bellatrix’ and jumped back as if he’d been burned.

Harry stared. Then he hissed, “This isn’t funny, Riddle! Wake up!” No answer. He hauled him to his feet and quickly started on his way to his room, ignoring the suspicious portraits on the walls.

A while later, a dazed Tom muttered, “Harry?”

“Oh thank goodness.” He let out a sigh of relief. “I thought something had gone wrong with the spell...”

Tom straightened, narrowing his eyes at him. “You put a spell on me that you weren’t even sure worked properly?”

“No, no,” Harry answered quickly.

“Good.” He paused. “What was that spell, by the way? It was very realistic.”

Harry flushed. “I didn’t need to know that!”

Tom gave him a puzzled look. “What are you talking about?”

“Well, it was a charm for daydreams, and when I tried to snap you out of it, you said...”

Tom’s cheeks burned. “It wasn’t like that!”

“Oh look!” Harry exclaimed loudly. “A door! My door, in fact!”

“Potter, get your mind out of the gutter-”

Harry threw open it open, never so glad to see Lucius as he was then. The blonde blinked and then inquired, “Why is Harry’s mind in the gutter?”

Harry jabbed a finger at Tom and replied “Daydream Charm” at the exact moment Tom answered “Nothing”.

Lucius smirked. Then the smirk faded and he demanded, “What are you doing here? Hadrian hasn’t – you aren’t-?”

“Hadrian doesn’t know I’m here,” Tom answered. “We’re going to free you and the other prisoners.”

“There’s just one problem with that,” Harry pointed out. “We only have one portkey, and it leads to the streets outside of this building near the Ministry, which are loaded with anti-apparation wards and Death Eaters.” Harry chucked his dark maroon robes and mask onto the floor and rummaged through the wardrobe, pulling out a black robe and slipping it on.

“...We’ll deal with that problem when it arises. Right now, we have to hurry.”

Nodding in agreement, the three took off in the direction of the ‘Sewage Overflow’, ignoring the map which told them they were heading in the wrong direction.

Harry turned the final corner that led to the dungeons and stopped. Sitting at the side of the door was the griffin he had seen roaming the

manor over the time he'd stayed there. It lifted its head to stare at him and leaped to its feet upon seeing Tom and Lucius by his side.

The griffin let out a piercing shriek that sounded both avian and leonine. Reaching for his wand, Tom whispered, "Why do I get the feeling that it recognizes me?"

Harry smiled grimly. "Because it does." He was almost certain his next theory was correct: "It's a horcrux."

Three heads, one of them not human, snapped in his direction. "How can you be sure?" Tom asked.

"Because it's just something I'd do." He fell into a dueling stance. "I'd like the symbolism, both magical and Muggle. The metaphorical embodiment of courage, power, boldness, and truth... Gryffindor and Ravenclaw combined."

Tom's eyes widened a second before the griffin charged. "Wingardium Leviosa!" He hurled the griffin into the wall and it mauled the air, trying to break the spell. Harry averted his eyes as Tom slammed it again and cast a nonverbal curse at the creature.

The griffin stopped fighting. It was silent for a moment before he heard something heavy sag onto the floor.

Tom was breathing hard, nausea at the brutal death and triumph mingling in his stomach. The griffin's wings lay crumpled by its side and although there were no outward signs, he knew the creature's blood was solidifying in its veins.

Lucius said quietly, "Let's go." None of them looked in the griffin's direction as Harry led them to the dungeon door, his mouth and jaw set in a firm, unyielding line. A part of him felt as if that was his soul being attacked...but he knew that wasn't the case. He couldn't think like that.

He pressed his palm to the handle and a click was heard. "My magic registers as his," Harry explained at Tom's raised eyebrow. "I should be able to open all the cells." He stepped inside and quickly Stunned



the guards before they had a chance to be surprised. They fell onto the ground. The prisoners stared at him in bewilderment. Harry pressed his palm to each of the locks, willing them open.

He had just gone through his fifth cell when the captive inside let out a roar and launched himself at Harry. Tom launched him back into the cell with a wave of his wand. The man, restrained by the invisible magic, clawed in front of him, futilely trying to reach Harry's face.

A Stunner took care of the problem. "Continue, Harry." The boy didn't answer. "Harry. He doesn't know who you really are. Forget him." Slowly, Harry resumed. He touched his hand to the Malfoys' when a cry frayed his focus.

Lucius grabbed Tom as he toppled forward, steadying him.

"What?" Hadrian shouted in the vision. "Harry betrayed us?"

Ron bowed his head. "There is no other explanation. Somehow, the aurors knew that I was here and someone tried to evacuate the Ministry before the attack." He held up a crumpled paper crane with Bellatrix's message. "Beta One told me Harry left him in charge."

"And went where?" was the sharp demand.

Tom clutched his scar and tried not to scream as the Dark Lord was given the answer. White spots flooded his vision; he heard Harry's voice three seconds after he'd opened his mouth.

Hadrian snapped, "Take Alpha!"

"Wait-" Ron grabbed his arm but Hadrian threw it off. In a more subdued tone, he said, "A commander can't just abandon his troops in the middle of battle-"

"I will not stand for this treason! I know what he's doing – he's gone to free the prisoners. We cannot allow that to happen. Take Alpha." Hadrian seized his portkey. "Home!"

Tom managed to keep from collapsing as the vision faded. His scar, however, prickled in warning. “H-Hadrian,” he panted, “is in the manor.”

Blood drained from everyone’s faces. “Lucius,” Harry quickly ordered, “transfigure everyone to chess pieces and keep them in your robe pocket.”

“Chess pieces? That is completely-”

“We only have one portkey! We won’t all get out of here alive if we don’t sacrifice some dignity!” Tom broke in. “Do as he says! Harry and I will keep him busy if we need to!”

“Tom-”

“Do it!”

Fear, not for himself but for Tom and Harry, ignited his features. Reluctantly, he picked up one of the guard’s wands and turned them on the prisoners, who were in no shape to resist. Sending an apologetic look to his parents, he transfigured them all and scooped them up.

Harry fumbled for the portkey. “Quick – grab it-”

Three hands reached out but Tom froze when the door to the dungeon was blasted clear off its hinges. He had less than a heartbeat to register the impossibly livid Dark Lord at the door before Fiendfrye erupted from Hadrian’s wand.

Tom, Harry, and Lucius threw up specialized shields, straining to preserve them. Lucius legs’ buckled under the onslaught and Harry’s head felt as if it had been emptied and refilled with helium.

Just as he feared that he would pass out, the flames vanished. Any trace of fatigue its caster might have felt was completely hidden by the murderous expression on his face. Harry snatched Tom and

Lucius hands, closed them around the portkey, and shouted, "Mission!"

The portkey activated, hurling them into the London streets. Predictably, Lucius and Tom remained standing, while Harry found himself eating asphalt. He scrambled to his feet, grabbing their wrists and dragging them into the nearest alleyway. "Muffliato," he incanted as Tom Disillusioned the three of them.

Huddled behind a trash bin, they held their breaths as Hadrian reappeared in the place they had just landed, wand out and tilting his head to the side to listen. Harry jerked in shock, unable to believe that his face could create such a look of unfathomable fury.

The spell kept the Dark Lord from hearing. Hadrian snapped open the mobile phone all the Inner Circle carried and barked, "Get Alpha to the drop off point. I want them combing the area for our double-crossing ingrate, the inbreed, and the Brat Who Lived."

Lucius stated in a monotone punctured by barely concealed panic, "We're done for. If he casts just one homenum revelio-"

"He'd need to be close to us first," Tom whispered back. "Stop talking."

Twenty seven Death Eaters portkeyed to Hadrian's side, immediately bowing. "You know your orders," Hadrian snarled, throwing out a hand to indicate the city around him. "Find them and execute them! Don't bother with slow deaths – I want their corpses at my feet by nightfall!"

"Yes, My Lord."

The Death Eaters dispersed in fireteams. One wandered into Tom, Lucius, and Harry's alley. "Approach and Stun," Tom whispered to the space behind him where he knew his friends were. "Take the one relative to your position." Slowly, they did as he suggested, creeping up to the Death Eaters.

“Homenu-”

Lucius’ Stunner took the Death Eater out before he could finish.

Another opened his mouth to shout a warning but Harry hit him in the neck; Tom’s Death Eater dropped as well. Cancelling the Disillusionment Charms, Tom said, “We have to find some way of getting out of here.”

Briefly glancing at the splayed bodies, Harry peered into the street. His heart skipped a beat when he spotted a dead Muggle man lying on the floor, eyes unseeing and glassy. “I...I have an idea,” he told them, hating himself for what he had to do.

“Harry-” Lucius started to object but Harry had already entered the streets and started searching through the man’s pockets, not hearing anyone nearby.

“Bellatrix,” Tom told her image in the Chocolate Frog, “get out here as soon as possible. We’re about a block from the visitor’s entrance-”

“I’m a little busy,” she answered as she shot off a spell, “kicking red-robed posterior, Tom-”

“Leave that to the Order. We need your help here. Are there any unconscious or dead Death Eaters around you?”

“Yes.”

“Grab his or her portkey and tell it ‘mission’.”

Harry fished out the car keys he’d been looking for and slunk back into the alley. “We have to leave soon,” he urged. “I hear a couple of Death Eaters coming this way.”

“Bellatrix is coming - she’ll be here in a few seconds.”

Lucius inquired, “What do you have in your hand?”

“A car key.”

“How do you know which one it works for?”

Harry replied, “I’m going to tell it to unlock and follow the noise to the right one.”

Light illuminated the street; the trio turned their wands on the source, only to lower them when Bellatrix appeared, wavy tresses escaping her hair band and onto her shoulders and a cut on her arm. “Lucius!”

The Malfoy heir smiled and she grabbed him in a hug. “Are you alright?”

“Me?” He glanced at her arm. “I’m not the one bleeding-”

“I know this is rude, but don’t have time for this.” Harry reminded, “Death Eaters could be here at any moment.” He pressed the unlock button and a car let out an answering call. Harry knew that he may as well have sent a beacon to any Death Eater in the vicinity so he started running towards it. “Let’s go!”

He sprinted out onto the pavement and followed the sound again. Already he could hear footsteps pounding towards them. Come on, Harry prayed. Be close by, be close by..!

He turned the corner and halted in front of a blinking BMW. In disbelief, Harry clicked the button again. There was no doubt; their ride was the luxury vehicle in front of them.

Lucius, arriving a few second later, surveyed the car with interest. “I am no expert on Muggle contraptions, but this vehicle is quite...impressive.”

Harry almost laughed. It figured that he’d have such an expensive taste in cars. “Yeah. And we’re no doubt about to trash it. Get in.”

Bellatrix grinned. “What’s the Muggle expression? Oh yes – shotgun!”

“What?” Tom exclaimed. “You don’t know anything about driving! What if he needs help?” He frowned after a thought occurred to him and turned to Harry. “Do you even have your license?”

“...Do you?”

Tom didn’t answer. Instead he opened the car door and went in. Lucius soon followed. As soon as Bellatrix was sitting in the front seat, Harry gunned the ignition.

In all honesty, he hadn’t driven a car in his life, but he’d spent years watching the Dursleys drive, and most of the mechanisms that controlled the car’s main functions were labeled, anyway. Besides, if Dudley could do it...“Buckle up.” He shifted the car into drive, took off the parking break, and pressed the accelerator.

The car propelled out of the parking space; Harry jerked the wheel to the right to get it back into the correct lane.

“Merlin!”

“Sorry! Just...getting used to it. Didn’t think it would respond so easily...”

Tom scowled. “Exactly how much experience do you have?” A spell whizzing past his window cut off the impending argument that would have no doubt arose.

"We've got company!" Bellatrix announced in a sing-song voice.

"Not any more, we don't." Harry drove the car forward, grimacing as some unidentified spell smashed into the trunk. It threw them forward, the seat belt cutting into their stomachs, and Harry slammed the accelerator, not liking how close they were in spell range.

"Avada Kedavra!"

Green light exploded all over the back left tire on impact.

"Morgana!" Lucius gasped. "Hurry - aagh!" The tires squealed as Harry flung them around a corner.

Death Eaters rained hexes and curses on the car as they hurdled through the street and Harry yelled, "Where did all these guys come from?"

The car lurched and Tom shouted, "Harry!" A paralyzed Lucius clutched the door handle, ghostly pale.

Boom!

"Circe!"

The road beside them exploded. Another Killing Curse slammed into the windshield and punched a hole straight through the glass. A screech pierced the air as he slammed the breaks, trying not to run over the people right in front of them.

"Watch out!"

Harry couldn't help but wonder if he had some sort of seer ability that he wasn't aware of. Flooding the streets with Muggles and Death Eaters had made it near impossible to escape the Ministry.

"Turn left, turn left!"

"There's only one driver in this car, Tom!" Harry snapped and locked onto the traffic light coming up fast. "Why are there so many Death Eaters here? Aren't they supposed to be in the Ministry?"

A grinning Bellatrix explained as he barreled past a clump of Death Eaters, "The Death Eaters were retreating by the time I left. I wasn't sure it was really happening, but-"

"That's a red light!" Tom cried. "Stop! Stop!"

“Salazar Slytherin and all his descendents!” Lucius’ composure was completely gone.

“We’re not going to make it!”

“We are! Stop being such a pessimist!”

“I’m a realist! We’re going to crash!”

“Stop panicking! I’ve got this!”

Lucius said something Harry was certain wasn’t polite in French.

The car zoomed through the crossroads, narrowly avoiding a van as it crept around the corner.

Harry breathed a sigh of relief, adrenaline surging in his veins.

Bellatrix was laughing delightedly “This is fun!”

“Are you crazy?” Tom was incredulous. “Harry, slow down!”

Harry pointed to the rearview mirror. “I would if we didn’t have certain masked minions chasing us!”

Lucius yelled, “Don’t take your hand off the wheel!”

Still laughing, Bellatrix rolled down her window, ignoring the wind whipping her face. She leaned out and shot a protego over the back of their car. “Tom, Lucius – allocate the mental breakdowns later and help me!”

Lucius was still attaching himself to any possible handle for dear life; Tom shakily rolled down his window and fired a curse into the ranks of Death Eaters attempting to follow them. “Bombarda maximus!”

The cloud of blacktop that vomited up into the air obscured their car from view; Harry honked the horn and lane changed before realizing, “Hey, we’re past the anti-apparation wards-”



“Thank Merlin,” Lucius breathed. “Stop the car.”

“But we’re not-”

“This instant!” he snapped. “They cannot possibly catch up to us!”

Rather defensively, Harry muttered, “My driving isn’t that bad...for the situation...” He pulled over around the next block, the buildings around them and their distance mostly protecting them from unfriendly spells.

Lucius instantly threw open the door and collapsed on his knees on the pavement. “Solid ground!” he praised worshipfully.

Tom stumbled out of the car and Shrank it as soon as Harry and Bellatrix had exited. “We are never,” he swore, “doing that again.”

Harry crossed his arms. “It wasn’t that bad!”

“Solid ground...”

“Potter, I’ll have you know that you’ve traumatized me for life..!”

Bellatrix clapped him on the shoulder. “Well, I thought you did just fine. I’ve got to get myself one of those...”

Harry smirked despite himself. “Coming from you, that’s not really all that reassuring.”

She rolled her eyes. “It looks like the Death Eaters are retreating; the Order should be done soon. Let’s apparate to the Leaky Cauldron and take the Floo to Hogwarts.”

“Do we really have to go down?”

“Of course we do; we wouldn’t want to deprive the school of their courageous heroes, would we?”

Harry corrected, "You mean 'you' – no one saw me. Except the Death Eaters."

"Don't you want the students to show their appreciation?"

"It's the morning," he deadpanned. "And you know just as well as I do that I hate everyone staring at me. Especially at breakfast."

"Well," Tom smiled as he entered the Great Hall, "think of it this way: they'll be staring at Bellatrix, Lucius and I as well. Only about 300 people will be looking at you at one time."

Somehow, that didn't make Harry feel drastically better.

Harry squared his shoulders and walked next to Tom through the familiar open doors, deftly ignoring the stunned looks from the audience that were not absorbed in the newspapers and death glares from the Gryffindors. The two of them took their usual places in the Slytherin table and he tried to pretend he didn't notice the heads craning in his direction.

"You seem to have become popular," Lucius observed dryly.

Harry glanced behind him. Jasmine, Teddy, Hugo, and Rose looked as if they were going to march over at any second and attempt to murder him. "Yeah. I can just feel the love pouring right off of them." His eyes caught the sight of a giant flat screen television hanging on the wall where a large tapestry usually was. He pointed. "When did that get here?"

"Oh, that's always been there," Bellatrix let him know as she ate a slice of her pancakes. "It's usually hidden, though. I imagine that because of the attack on the Ministry last night, the professors want us all to watch the Minister's address to the nation."

"Address to the nation?"

"Yes. The Minister must have managed to escape. He was the head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, so I suppose the

training he had paid off.” Harry frowned, Hadrian’s description of the bomb’s capabilities replaying in his ears. “He and the higher ups that survived have called an emergency meeting. Dumbledore’s gone, as well as the remaining Wizengamot and Department heads.”

“Are you parents there, Lucius?”

“No. They need time to recover.”

“Oh. So...what are they trying to do?”

Tom sipped his glass of water and answered, “Most likely come up with strategies for combating Hadrian and his lackeys. They also need to organize mass elections and such; they’ll be conferencing for months. Minister Scrimgeour knows that the Wizarding World is afraid and uncertain, however, so he’s trying to reassure the populace.”

Slowly, Harry nodded. Technomagic really made a lot of things possible. He wondered, if something similar happened in his world, how they would have done something like this. Through newspapers, most likely. This way is definitely more personal, though.

The screen flashed on and the noise in the Great Hall died as everyone’s attention leaped up. Skeeter was on the site, basically reiterating what Bellatrix and Tom had said to Harry. Flags with the Ministry’s symbol flew on either side of a platform with a single podium at its front and center. Rows upon rows of seats were filled up with witches and wizards of political power; Harry spotted Dumbledore at the far end of the first row.

Tom watched as the Undersecretary stood and announced, “Ladies and gentlemen – the Minister of Magic!”

All the people that had been seated rose to their feet as Scrimgeour entered through a side door, a half-smirk on his face and wand lightly held in one hand. Applause broke across the Great Hall as relieved students expressed their thanks that he had survived.

With a grace Tom hadn't realized that the Minister had, Scrimgeour crossed over to the podium and raised a hand for silence. As voices died, the standing politicians seated themselves. "Good morning, ladies and gentlemen," he began. "It is my pleasure to see you all gathered before me, no longer hiding but out in the open. As you all know, the Ministry suffered a great blow last night, a blow that punished it irreparably for its numerous past errors."

"What?" Bellatrix frowned, several students mirroring her expression.

"Indeed, the Ministry can count what occurred as one of its lackluster moments. And yet, there have been many of those, haven't there? So many, that this nation has become comfortable and expectant of such tragedies."

Harry looked at Tom in question, who knew no better than he did. "He must," he eventually dismissed, "be leading up to a point." When Scrimgeour elaborated that the government will now change to better serve its people and root out the cause of its mistakes, he thought he was right.

He stopped feeling right as the speech progressed. "This will be a new era in Wizarding Britain. No longer will wizards and witches be under the thumb of a Muggle leader. No longer will it consist of blatant corruption and prejudice. It will be redesigned, upgraded – improved."

At this point, a man in the audience started coming onto the stage, whispering urgently in the Minister's ear. Scrimgeour's lazily contented smile flourished and Tom balked at seeing it on his normally incorrigibly stern face. "Oh? I see I haven't made myself clear. Starting from this moment onwards, there will be no more Ministry of Magic. Instead, we will have a new order – Wizarding Britain will fall under a new banner: the banner of the Republic of Albion."

Albion, he recalled, was Great Britain's ancient name. "Is he ill?" Lucius demanded of no one in particular. "Or inebriated?"

Tom's mind whirled. The Minister started to speak again, but Tom's eyes were locked on his wand. Time seemed to come to a standstill as he watched him somersault a wand into the air and caught it.

"Under this new rule, we will wipe away the remains of an outdated, desiccated government and bring forth a glorious age of freedom and-"

Tom seized Harry's arm and heaved him to his feet.

"What are you-?"

"No time!" he whispered harshly. "Come with me – now!"

Bewildered, Harry let himself be dragged by Tom towards the exit of the Great Hall. The man who had been trying to stop Scrimgeour from speaking was asking him to step down from the stage.

"Step down?" the Minister replied with a laugh and his dirty-blond hair seemed to darken. "Well now, I'm afraid I can't do that." He jerked his head and suddenly a wizard Harry recognized as Neville Longbottom and two aurors grabbed the man by the arms.

"What is this?" the man cried, flinging his arms out as he struggled against them. The murmurs in the Great Hall had grown into raised voices. "Minister Scrimgeour, you-"

"Don't look back." Tom yanked him forward, sweat beginning to ice his skin as the ramifications of what was happening raced through his mind. "Keep moving-"

Harry and Tom vanished from the Great Hall while everyone inside stared, transfixed, as Scrimgeour began to laugh, his features shifting like wax. His skin lightened; his hair became darker and straighter; his face became younger. The Minister's brown eyes lit with brilliant gold.

The Polyjuice had faded on schedule. "I'm afraid you have me confused with someone else, Dawlish," Hadrian almost purred.

“Minister Scrimgeour, the head of your filthy administration, met a most unfortunate end at approximately 8:50pm last night.” The aurors standing against the walls of the room the politicians were in stepped forward, wands poised, as people began to panic. “The Departments are being rearranged as we speak!”

The man, Dawlish, was lugged out of the room, the few people that had gone for their wands following immediately after. “I suggest,” he gave a slow smile as the Undersecretary, now revealed to be Ronald Weasley, Stunned someone, “that you do not resist.”

McGonagall shut off the television. Hogwarts was thrown into pandemonium.

A/N: The End. Just kidding! I seriously doubt that scared anyone, anyway. So, Harry's made his choice...I know some of you were hoping for Harry to join Hadrian, but based on the poll, the majority wanted Harry to stick with Tom. I'm curious, though: at what point did you figure out that Scrimgeour 'wasn't exactly himself'? Reading this over once I uploaded it, I noticed that a few words seemed to have been deleted that hadn't on the original document. Odd...I guess the uploading process isn't as great as I thought it was?

On a completely different note, the Half-Blood Prince movie was awesome! I no longer feel disturbed at the prospect of Harry/Ginny. No offense intended, of course, to people who love that pairing :)

If you have time to look at my poll, please do!

## CHP17Chapter Seventeen

“Tom, what are you doing? The Minister-”

“That isn’t the Minister,” Tom cut him off. Harry’s eyes widened. “You might not have noticed, but you have this habit of somersaulting your wand.”

“And the Minister...” He trailed off. “Hadrian?” Harry’s voice felt the need to raise an octave. He let it.

“Yes,” Tom confirmed and several portraits gasped in horror, shattering any pretense of privacy. “I know previously only the older generations would have seen Hadrian’s face...but now it’s impossible for you to be in public.”

“I’m not hiding,” was the heated declaration. “He just took over the Ministry! Oh, wait, excuse me – the Republic of Albion! I can help. I will help.”

“Harry-”

He grabbed Tom’s wrist, forcing him to stop. “We’re in this together.” Under the determined gaze boring into him, Tom slowly nodded. “Good.” He let go. “Glad we have that straightened out.”

“...We still need to keep you out of sight for a while,” he murmured.

“You have to hide as well. And you’re not dumping me in the Chamber of Secrets.”

“But-”

“Look,” Harry ran a hand through his hair. “I might be feeling the aftereffects of shock here, but I know that Hogwarts isn’t going to be a safe place for me soon – for us soon. Hadrian wants to revamp the Wizarding community, and one of the first things he’s going to do is

take an interest in the 'education' of the next generation. If I were him, I'd make it a priority. And Dumbledore...we have to assume he's a POW."

Tom's fists clenched. "Alright. Throw on a Disillusionment Charm. You can hide in the Hospital Wing until we devise a coherent plan."

"The...Hospital Wing?"

"Black knows the password to our dorms. No doubt she won't have qualms letting Gryffindors inside to look for you. Some of the Slytherins will go to the Chamber entrance so we can't go there, the Room of Requirement is Lion territory, and I don't want to risk an unwanted visitor taking advantage of the Floo in Dumbledore's office to come to Hogwarts. Not many people will think to look here and you know how Pomfrey is about her medical lair."

Swiftly agreeing, Harry cast the spell over himself, the icy feeling of its magic worming over him indistinguishable from the chill in his stomach.

They had to move quickly. People were going to demand answers from anyone who knew 'Evander'. McGonagall would try to fend them off, but she couldn't stop everything.

Spelling open the familiar doors to the Hospital Wing, Tom scouted out a closed off corner usually reserved for quidditch players that had gotten up close and personal with bludgers and headed towards it. He drew the curtains around them and placed Notice Me Not Charms in every patch of the Hospital Wing he could see.

"Alright," Tom breathed out. Harry thought he sounded like he was speaking more to the curtains than to him. "Let's think about this rationally. Logically. Hadrian will either come personally to Hogwarts or send one of his high ranking lackeys. Therefore, we have to find a safe place for the remaining Order members, myself, and you."

Harry sat down on the available bed and stared unseeingly ahead. "He sent them to Azkaban."



Tom looked at him. "Pardon?"

"The people present at the address to the nation. He'd like the irony. He won't kill them."

Why don't I feel particularly better about that? Tom asked himself cynically. Who was in charge of the Order now? Practically every one of them held some sort of political position. Before he had been captured, the chain of command would designate Abraxus Malfoy in charge. But given how he was in no condition to take command...

Tom seriously hoped that the members that weren't incarcerated were putting up Fidelus Charms over their homes, because that was the only way they would be safe against Minist - Republic action.

Harry cocked his head as he heard two pairs of footsteps hurrying in their direction. Not long after, the doors opened. The two of them held their breaths.

"Tom?" Bellatrix's voice sounded. Tom let out a sigh of relief. "Where are you?"

"You still have the Point Me spell on, Bellatrix," Lucius drawled. A second later he yelped and massaged his shoulder. "Was that truly necessary?"

Tom dispelled the enchantments on the curtains and poked his head out. "In here." He frowned at her wand. "I sincerely hope no one else thinks about that."

Pushing through, she told him, "Don't count on it. People want to find Harry. They'll get creative."

"And once again," Harry grumbled, "I'm going to be entirely too popular."

"Enjoy it while it lasts," Lucius replied with an arched eyebrow.

“As much as I enjoy quality banter,” Bellatrix said, “we have an angry mob out for ‘Evander’s’ blood to worry about.”

“Hadrian will probably be here soon,” Tom informed. “Harry...assuming Dumbledore is out of commission and that Hadrian can get into the school, will the students need to be protected?”

Harry’s brow furrowed as he considered. Slowly, he said, “No. Not if they’re cooperative. Especially since just controlling Hogwarts gives him leverage against the students’ parents.”

“Then there will be a Death Eater presence in the school.”

“...Yes. I think so. Maybe he’ll modify their plans after whatever his Inner Circle suggests, but if it were purely his idea, I’m pretty sure that’s how he’d do it.”

Bellatrix spoke up. “Lucius and I will find somewhere to put Horcrux.”

“No.” Harry shook his head. “Don’t even bother hiding it. Destroy it. Andy won’t be hurt at all.”

Watching him carefully, Lucius inquired, “Experience?”

Harry thought it was a bit ironic that he was the person who asked. “Yes. Get basilisk fangs from the Chamber. That will destroy it.”

“I’ll leave Nagini with you two and tell her to say ‘open’ as soon as you tap her on the head three times,” Tom decided.

“And Harry?”

They all looked at him. Tom exhaled. “Right. We haven’t figured out what you and I are going to do as of yet.” He began pacing. “This is absurd...we should have seen this coming. But what’s done is done. Hadrian could be here in mere hours.”

“The Chamber,” Bellatrix insisted. “There are only two known parselmouths in England and neither of them are Hadrian’s supporters.”

“No...he’ll know where it is. Plenty of the younger Slytherins were boasting about seeing ‘the legendary Chamber of Secrets’ when we first opened it.”

“But that doesn’t mean he can get in.”

“Yes he can,” Harry disagreed. She placed her hands on her hips, a clear ‘oh really?’ in her eyes. “Parseltongue can be imitated. But even if he doesn’t do that, he could just trap a snake in a box or something beside the sink. How long do you think it will take until it says ‘open up’ in those conditions?”

After a moment, she admitted, “I wouldn’t have thought of that...”

“It’s Harry,” Tom half-smiled, half-grimaced. “He has a...unique thinking pattern.”

“Wards?” Lucius offered. “I’m certain you know some of the more obscure ones, Tom.”

“I do, but even if Hadrian didn’t know them and the counters too, nothing I could do would stand a chance against a reputable ward breaker.”

The blonde ran a hand through his pale hair. “If only we had some impenetrable fortress, somewhere where we could let people in but keep the others out.”

“Good luck finding one of those,” Tom returned darkly. “We have to accept the fact that we may have to seal ourselves off in some obscure room in the school. It might become a waiting game.”

Harry’s eyes glossed over in thought. Bellatrix voiced his unsaid opinion.

“If it was a waiting game, we would probably lose. They would have the kitchens. We wouldn’t. Even if we arranged to have a house elf pop in and out bringing us food, they probably would get caught.”

“I know it isn’t perfect, but I can’t think of anywhere else good enough, and it doesn’t sound like anyone else can, either. After all, the manors are out. If they are under Fidelus, we don’t know where they are or who the Secret Keepers are. If they aren’t...” No one wanted to dwell on that particular problem or voice it out loud.

Bellatrix, attempting to lighten the mood somewhat after that heartwarming thought, forced a smile. “So I suppose we’ll be playing hide and seek with the Death Eaters, skipping from classroom to classroom?”

“...That’s a horrible plan.”

“It wasn’t a plan! But honestly, can you think of somewhere to stay, Mr. Impenetrable fortress? Have fun finding that.”

“Perhaps the-”

An idea blossomed inside Harry’s head. He shot a look at Tom and wondered if he should even bring it up...but time was running out. He had to throw it out there. Interrupting rather reluctantly, he admitted, “Actually, I think I might know where we can find one of those.”

Tom, Bellatrix, and Lucius stared at him. Harry flushed under the attention.

“You know somewhere we can stay?” Tom was the first one to speak. He killed the urge to rush over and hug the boy, instead opting for some dignity. “Where?”

Harry hesitated. “Well, it’s...”

“Go on. Say it.”

“...It’s probably somewhere you don’t want to go.”

“Harry,” Tom started impatiently, “nothing you come up with could possibly be worse than the Chamber. That place may as well be a sewer.”

“Fine. Two words: blood wards.”

Tom felt himself tense. Stiffly, he said, “I stand corrected.”

“Surely you don’t mean that?” Lucius objected. “It is your home.”

“That place was never my home.”

Bellatrix pinched the bridge of her nose. “I can’t believe we didn’t think about it before. It is impenetrable, at least-”

“Until he turns seventeen,” Harry finished. “When is that, by the way?”

“December 31st.” Pause. “Within an hour from midnight.”

“I’m not going to ask how you know that. Anyway, that gives us less than a...week...” Harry had a feeling that the word that had just flashed in his mind would very succinctly summarize the situation but decided not to voice it.

“Isn’t,” Tom barely managed to hide his desperation, “there some other place any of you can think of? Preferably not anywhere near Little Hangleton?” He received a sympathetic expression in reply. “Wonderful.”

He did not want to go back to that...place. He’d thought he’d be free of it as soon as his seventh year began. The Man Who Gave Me Life But Isn’t My Father certainly had, Tom sneered, as well. He probably had one of his obnoxious, preposterously ostentatious parties to celebrate - and flaunt his wealth at the same time. Why waste an opportunity to kill two birds with one stone?

Was it too much to ask that the Riddles, sans himself, had opted for an indefinitely long vacation? Or that Jonathan would be on a sleepover marathon?

Tom was vaguely aware of himself growling before he ripped open the curtains. "Put your Disillusionment Charm over yourself, Harry. We're going to get any essential belongings and leave immediately."

Casting a helpless look at the other Slytherins, Harry followed the briskly marching Slytherin out. He silently thanked the fact that a talking space of empty air would be suspicious. Given his own experience with the Dursleys and what Harry knew of Riddle senior, he couldn't blame Tom for loathing the idea of going back to that place. If Harry had been forced to go back to the Dursleys...well, the results wouldn't have been pretty.

The hall was flooded with students. Harry would have been jostled in every cardinal direction if it hadn't been for the waves of danger Tom was emitting. No one dared to approach him, but Harry could still hear them whispering.

"That boy...Evander, right? He was Tom's friend...I bet Tom feels really stupid now."

"Betrayed, I'd say."

"-can't believe You Know Who's in charge of the Ministry!"

"-knew that Evander was a bad one."

"Who can he look that much like He Who Will Not Be Named?"

Harry restrained a snort. Months ago, they'd been singing his praises after what had happened in Hogsmeade. It was nice to know that people never changed, no matter what dimension they were in.

"Griffin," Tom glared at the portrait guarding the entrance to the Head Common Room, the password tasting foul on his tongue,

especially after the morning's revelation. Luckily for Tom, Jasmine, or both, she wasn't in the common room, waiting to gloat.

Harry decided that the way Tom stabbed the stairs with each step qualified as his version of storming, but opted not to comment. Instead, he wordlessly gathered his invisibility cloak and clothes. The only other thing he had was his textbooks, after all, and he didn't want to take those.

Tom, on the other hand, eyed the copious amount of books that seemed to have been breeding on his bookshelf before sliding them into a Bottomless bag. "Nagini," he hissed.

The cockatrice, who had been sleeping on her back over a pillow formerly belonging to the toad, pawed at the air.

Harry smirked. "I think she's dreaming."

"Nagini," Tom tried again. Her tail flicked in response.

Harry knelt by her side and, covering its eyes, gently shook it. "Wake up, Nagini. We have a job for you to do."

Instantly, she bolted up. "Mommy!" she cried, completely unaware of Tom scowling jealously in the background. "You are back!"

Harry blinked before turning. "She doesn't speak like a four year old house-elf anymore?"

"My cockatrice never spoke like a four year old house-elf." He haughtily crossed his arms and then glowered. "It figures she would respond to you, mommy."

Harry flushed. "Whatever you say, mother." As the cockatrice fussed over Harry's hair, probably convinced that if she looked hard enough, she would find hidden treasure, he pried her off. "Nagini, I need you to do something for me."

"Yes?"

“... Mother and I,” Tom rolled his eyes as he heard the self-conscious way Harry said it, “are going to be away for a while. Bellatrix and Lucius will take care of you.”

Nagini let out a long, pitiful sound Harry interpreted as a wail. “Mommy is leaving again? Again?”

“Um, well, you see-”

“Mommy is always gone!”

“Er, mommy is very busy-”

“Nagini wants mommy to stay!” she flapped her wings resolutely and latched onto the front of his shirt.

Harry winced as the hooks on the ends of the wings dug into his skin. “Ow! No, I can’t stay-”

“Then Nagini will go with mommy,” was the stubborn reply.

“Please tell me,” Harry growled as he tried to extricate her from his person, “that this isn’t teenage rebellion. Nagini, let go!”

“Harry, you have to be firm.”

“You try and be firm when this thing is mauling your chest!”

“Mommy won’t go, mommy won’t go!”

“Mommy will go and that is final!”

“That was very convincing, Harry.” Sighing as Harry seized her waist and started tugging, Tom instructed, “Nagini. Decorum.”

The cockatrice paused. Slowly, she released Harry’s shirt and sulked. “Yes mother...”



Harry bathed Tom in an incredulous expression. “How come she listens to you? You didn’t even say more than two words!”

“I’m just a good parent,” he retorted smugly.

Harry restrained the urge to toss a pillow at him and instead settled for Nagini. Tom’s eyes widened in surprise before he caught the lightly thrown cockatrice, who had opened her wings and was using them to glide, around the stomach. “You tell her what needs to be done then, O Parental One.”

With a shrug, Tom began the struggle to describe Lucius and Bellatrix to Nagini through scent alone, which was, unsurprisingly enough, near impossible. Well, he did know what Bellatrix’s perfume smelt like, so he could describe her to an extent. Lucius was a challenge, though he’d be concerned if it turned out he’d known, since that tidbit ventured into the lair of ‘too much information’.

Finally, he gave up and said that Bellatrix and whoever entered the room with her were her new handlers. “When they tap you on the head three times, say ‘open’.” It occurred to him then that they didn’t have a way to close the Chamber, but he couldn’t afford the time to look for them and give them the signal for making her say ‘close’. Hopefully they’ll figure some way to discourage anyone from going to that bathroom, then.

“We have to go.” Harry’s voice, a lick of urgency lurking beneath it, stole his attention. “I hear a few people heading this way.”

“Jasmine?”

“...I can’t exactly tell...”

Flushing slightly, Tom felt he had to explain, “In one of my scar-induced visions, Hadrian was able to tell who were the rooms around him by the sound of their footsteps.”

“Oh.” He paused. “I didn’t pay enough attention to know what her steps sound like.” The silence stretched out for a while. Neither of them wanted to have to take those steps out of the room, the ones that would signal that their time at Hogwarts had ended.

After that, everything was unknown – they would be fugitives with no one to help them but themselves.

Finally, Harry cast another Disillusionment Charm over himself, wincing at the feeling, and opened the door.

Tom threw a fistful of Floo powder into the headmaster’s fireplace and stepped inside. “Riddle Manor!” Viridian flames snaked around his body. The tendrils roared before consuming and then dragging him into the bowels of a blatantly Victorian fireplace.

Tom thought he heard a surprised squeak as the flames slithered off him as he strode out of the fire, glancing around. A shocked eight year old boy was gaping up at him from a heap on the floor.

“Oh.” Tom arched an eyebrow. “It’s you. Fell off the chair, did we?”

The boy’s cheeks reddened in indignation. “What are you doing here?”

“Hmm, I was under the distinct impression that I was arriving. Forgive me if that is not the case.”

“You’re not supposed to be here!” He scrambled to his feet. “I’m telling dad!”

Tom sneered. “Then run along, dear brother, and tell that worthless piece of – oof!”

He was convinced that it was a hippogriff that had just rammed into his back and slammed him onto the floor. Tom gagged on the taste of the carpet, groaning in pain. The boy burst out laughing.

“Sorry,” Harry apologized.

“For goodness sake Potter, did you send a bloody troll through the fire?!”

“I said I’m sorry! I’m just not good with the Floo, alright?”

“Ow! Argh, get off me!” Tom attempted to dislodge himself from underneath Harry. “Are you trying to break my ribs?” Harry glared but climbed to his feet. Brushing his robes off imperiously, Tom rose. “Continue laughing,” he told the boy, “and you’ll regret it.”

The snickering ended, but not for the reason Tom liked. “You brought someone here?” His eyes widened. “Dad’s going to kill you!”

Tom scowled down at him. “Go away, Jonathan.” He gestured to the closest open archway. “This way, Harry.”

“You’re being rude!”

“I’m horrified. Now run off and tattle like a good little spy.”

Jonathan huffed, sticking his nose in the air in an astonishing rendition of Draco Malfoy, and rushed out of the living room to do just that.

Harry watched him leave in mixed bewilderment and amusement. “Who’s that?”

“A miserable, irritating cretin,” Tom growled. “Or a demon-human hybrid. Take your pick.”

“Does this demon-human hybrid have a name?”

Rolling his eyes, Tom responded, “Jonathan William Riddle, my brother. Isn’t he special? He even has a name in italics. But that’s hardly important. The guest room is across the hall from mine.”

As Tom led him through the mansion, Harry couldn't help but gawk. Spacious rooms carpeted every inch of it, each varnished with paintings, sleek wooden furniture, and elegant architecture. Harry wouldn't be surprised if the dust motes were decorated. Every pore of the place screamed, "Filthy rich!"

"Have you ever gotten lost in this place?" he muttered. They stepped into another room, and Harry learned that Riddle Manor's staircase had an entire room all to itself. With a tall domed ceiling.

"No," Tom responded dryly, "but I've been blinded by the sheer volume of lights that my father insists lighting this floor with. Apparently, it makes everything grander." Harry decided not to test the claim by looking down; still, a quick glance through the corner of his eye told him that the floor was marble, granite, or an amazing imitation or either. "It's rather embarrassing, actually. That man," Harry realized that Tom was still talking about his father, "is ridiculously pretentious."

Still astounded by it all, Harry walked up the stairs Tom led him up. They took a few more rights and lefts, and finally made it to a hallway with three doors.

"Behold," Tom declared sarcastically, "the guest rooms. Mine's the middle one."

"Wait, your room is one of the guest rooms?"

"Let's just say that my father views my time here as an all-expenses-paid visitation." He chose the one on the left for Harry, thinking he'd appreciate the large window. Tom pushed open the door to Harry's new room, saying, "It's not much, but-"

"Are you kidding me? This is bigger than the Dursley's dining room, kitchen, and living room combined!" He added to himself under his breath, "Certainly beats the cupboard under the stairs."

"What was that?"

“Nothing!”

“I thought you said something about a cupboard,” Tom said slowly.

“Cupboard, huh? You hear interesting things.”

“Your relatives kept you in a cupboard?”

“There was no cupboard!”

“And I thought my relatives were despicable...”

“There was no cupboard Riddle. No cupboard.” He glared at the other boy and Tom raised his hands in surrender. “Good.”

“Yes. Right. Well, the bathroom is over there,” he walked inside and opened up an attached door. “I think we’ll have to steal one of the soap bars from the other bathrooms, but everything else in here should be fine. I’ll try and find a spare toothbrush for you.” Pause. “I don’t think there’s much else to say. It’s hardly a mystery what a room entails...”

Something suddenly occurred to Harry. “Merlin!”

“What?” Tom asked anxiously.

“The Floo – we need someone to take Riddle Manor off the network, or Death Eaters’s will-”

“The wards will prevent that,” Tom assured, relaxing slightly.

“Oh.” Harry then asked, “If that’s the case, when do you think we’ll be cut off from the Floo Network?” At Tom’s frown, he explained, “I’m guessing that Lucius and Bellatrix know this too, right? Well, they’ll have no reason not to tell any Death Eater that demands the information from them. In fact, they’ll have to – they’ll probably be threatened with something if they don’t. And if the Death Eaters can’t

use the Floo here, they won't let anyone else that can use it. Like the Order."

Tom felt a chill begin to make its way into the room. That wouldn't be good by anyone's definition.

Well, except Hadrian's. But that hardly counted. "I think that all depends on how far ahead Hadrian's been thinking. Given his level of preparation so far, I'd say he must have known that we'd be partial to the Going into Hiding option after his coup. He probably has a few guesses where we'd go – Riddle Manor will be on his list." Pacing suddenly became a lot more favorable than it had been before, and Tom saw no reason not to indulge himself. "We should assume the Floo connection will be cut in a matter of hours."

How were they going to let everyone in safely? Would it even occur to the Order to Floo to Riddle Manor in the first place? Everything was happening so quickly – everything he thought of doing seemed to have some devastating flaw that he'd only realize was there at the last minute.

"Does that mean Death Eaters are going to surround the Manor?" Harry wondered.

"No!" Tom snapped. Harry frowned. "Sorry. I'm just...this isn't the best time for complications."

Harry smiled ruefully. "I didn't know understatement was in fashion today. What else is new?" Tom tried to get his mouth to do something that at least vaguely resembled an upward motion. He couldn't tell whether he'd succeeded or not and decided to change the subject before he made it any more obvious that he was about to have a mild panic attack. To do that, he slipped the books he'd packed from his dorm and set them on the nightstand next to the bed.

Harry peered over his shoulder, reading titles like "Raising a Champion", "Training a Wizarding Knight, Volume I", "Deeds of The Warrior: Godric Gryffindor", and "Ridire: A Translation". "What are all those?"

“ Historical accounts, biographies, and training manuals for campeadori,” Tom revealed. “Most of them are quite insulting. Campeadori are treated and viewed as particularly valuable attack dogs.” He handed the first one to Harry. “I’d tell you that it’s the influence of a more prejudiced time period, but many people today still see campeadori in the same light. It lessened when Hadrian became ‘independent’ or ‘rogue’, as some of these authors refer to it, and made it obvious that a cameador didn’t need a lord, but...well, I hope you won’t be too offended. They were the best I could find, and they’ll give you a better idea of how to train yourself.”

Harry could have laughed in relief, but it would probably come out as sane as a St. Mungos' patient's, and that was something neither of them needed right now. He’d been terrified with the idea that Hadrian really was the only thing that would keep him from killing by accident. Now, the future looked so much brighter.

Nodding, Harry thanked him and Tom quickly stepped out of the room. He shut the door, leaning against it, and managed to stop the shuddering breath he wanted to release from leaving his chest.

It was inevitable. Death Eaters would surround the Manor. They’d be trapped in their so called ‘impenetrable fortress’ and Hadrian would toy with the inhabitation of Little Hangleton, knowing that Tom and Harry would be forced to watch. The Dark Lord was ruthless when his emotions were running high, especially if the cause of that involved his enemies.

If they didn’t rush out when it became too much for their consciences, they’d probably spend the last few days without sleeping, knowing that the minute Tom turned seventeen, the wards were coming down, and they’d be left to Hadrian’s tender mercies.

He bit his lip, hands clenching and fingernails slicing his skin. Though Tom didn’t exactly get all warm and fuzzy about his family, he wasn’t going to allow anyone to hurt them. “Muggles won’t stand a chance against Hadrian,” he murmured. But...but I have to consider my own value in the war effort. He gritted his teeth. Father won’t leave just because I say so. If I stay, they’ll be targets. But I have to think of the

prophecy – this isn't just about me and my family. I have to save myself for...for Hadrian.

And portkeys weren't going to work. Tom might be intelligent, but he wasn't a miracle worker. Only a select group of people knew how to create portkeys, and that was because they'd undergone an intense training program. "Merlin..."

"What's wrong?"

Tom blinked, jerking himself out of his thoughts. Jonathan stared quizzically up at him, arms crossed. Salazar, Tom cursed. He'd thought Harry witnessing his less-than-perfect composure was bad, but this gave the word a whole new meaning. "If you came here to find someone to get in trouble, you've found him. Now off with you-"

"I heard what you said," he evaded Tom's reaching hand. "You said we're not going to stand a chance against Hadri...what's his face!"

Picturing the Dark Lord's expression after hearing his moniker mutilated like that brought a grim sort of humor. He shook it off. "You misheard."

"I did not and you know it."

Tom briefly closed his eyes. "Jonathan, I don't have time for this. I need to think."

"Maybe I can help," he offered, sounding strangely hopeful.

Tom placed his hands on his brother's shoulders, forcing him to see how serious he was. "You can't."

Fear ghost in Jonathan's eyes. "Tom...what's going on?"

"Nothing you need to concern yourself with." He gave a quick, fake smile. "It's just wizard business. Your father would be horrified if he knew you were listening-"



“I’m not stupid, you know!” Jonathan burst out. “I heard what dad was saying about some Dark Lord after you – he’s coming here, isn’t he?” He grabbed Tom’s sleeve. “If he’s coming, we’ve got to get out of here!”

Abandoning the Insult Jonathan’s Intelligence tactic he’d mostly adopted, Tom corrected, “We’ aren’t going anywhere. I have to stay here. Once your father and mother return, you will be leaving.”

Jonathan didn’t make the expected comment, which would be along the lines of ‘don’t tell me what to do’. “What do you mean? Why aren’t you coming with us?”

The door behind them opened slowly. Harry awkwardly cleared his throat and Tom found the energy to shoot him a glare. “Oh, so now you hear people outside? You’re a campeador – how did you not hear Jonathan sneaking up here to eavesdrop on us?”

Harry swallowed a retort about being distracted by thoughts of their impending doom. Instead, he said, “There’s a car pulling up in the driveway.”

“Did you see who’s in it?”

“Yeah. A man who looks like a carbon copy of you with slightly darker hair, aged a few decades, and a blonde woman.”

“That’s dad and mum,” Jonathan supplied.

“Wonderful,” Tom deadpanned. “Just what I need: them arriving before I had a chance to formulate a diplomatic speech meant to convince them to evict their own home.”

“Are you insulting dad?” Jonathan’s voice was loaded with suspicion.

Harry looked at Tom. “We’re evicting them?”

“Of course; house arrest will cost them their-” he glanced at his brother and amended, “-will be unfortunate if the wards...fail to live up to expectations.”

“...Do you think you can convince them?”

“Victoria – mother – will be. She’s the peacekeeper in the family and not at all offended by my magical heritage. My father, however...” He managed to stop his lip from curling and mentally congratulated himself. “He will pose a problem.”

Harry read between the lines. “But do you think..?”

Far too casually to be genuine, Tom answered, “Don’t worry. I’ll just have a verbal sparring match with my father for a few minutes, threaten him with magic I’ll never perform, and he’ll swear to dance on my grave and the graves of any wizards he comes across before storming off with everyone else in tow.”

Jonathan was torn between protesting at the description and discerning the truth from all the euphemisms and such exchanged by the two wizards. “I can help.”

“Jonathan, for the last time, you can’t-”

“But I can,” he insisted. “Dad won’t listen to you but he’ll listen to me.”

Harry paused, realizing that the Dudley Effect was just what they needed at this point. Two overly concerned parents would make this so much easier. Tom, however, didn’t see it that way. “No. I am not going to involve you in this.”

“Tom,” Harry interjected, “we don’t have much choice.”

“I’m not going to have this discussion with you, Harry. He’s only eight.”

“Eight and a half!”

“A minor difference.”

Harry pressed, “He’s going to find out anyway. You may as well make this go as smoothly as possible. I know it’s your call; he’s your family. But you have to tell your dad, and it sounds like he won’t have many qualms about letting your brother know just how much...well, trouble you’ve caused.”

“...Tom isn’t that much trouble,” Jonathan muttered to the floor, completely missing the surprise erupting on Tom’s face. Harry, sensing a Moment on the horizon, stepped around Tom, strategically placing himself closer to the bathroom in his new room, which he would shamelessly exploit as an excuse to leave, if necessary.

Tom spoke quietly after a silence, “I should think of some way to tell them.”

“You don’t have to do that! We can just leave. ”

“Exactly.”

“No,” frustration slipped into his tone, “I meant you as well!”

“Me?”

“Yes!” the boy almost wailed. “You, me, dad, mum – we’ll go somewhere safe! Your friend, too. That Dark Lord won’t find us. We can go to dad’s cousin’s house.”

“Jonathan, I have to stay here-”

“No, you don’t!”

“Look, I have my reasons-”

Harry said something that could have been about the bathroom, or could have been about the state of the British economy – he really

wasn't sure and really didn't care. What he did care about was exiting into his room and trying to block out the private conversation going on behind him.

"Don't worry," Tom was soothing. "The blood wards will protect me."

"There you go with that 'me' rubbish – you're not staying here! If you do, I won't go either!"

Harry suddenly found the branch outside the room incredibly interesting. Oh, such vibrant colors...such nice, splintery...goodness...

The blonde woman, Victoria, and Mr. Riddle had finished taking a small detour around the fountain in front of their mansion and were heading back towards the entrance. Harry pictured them walking through the double doors, across the (imitation?) marble hallway, and calling out for their younger son.

He plugged his fingers in his ears and recited some random transfiguration theory in his head; being a campeador was making drowning out conversation difficult.

Harry wondered if he'd be having a conversation like this as well if he'd had siblings. How exactly would he start? Especially since this might be the last time I'd see them.

The realization elicited a gasp. That was right, wasn't it? Tom must have come to a similar conclusion a while ago; Harry had noticed how his calm poise seemed particularly faulty today. He probably thought that if he was going to fight Hadrian and keep the effects of the Dark Lord's death permanent, his best chance would be when the government was at its least stable.

But that means he has to complete the prophecy in a matter of days. Maybe in a matter of hours. Harry sank onto the bed, visions of himself and Voldemort facing off flashing in his head. He's not ready. And he knows it.

Harry prayed that Tom had some incredible, awe-inspiring plan up his sleeve, because he refused to accept the fact that the prophecy was going to complete in the most horrible way imaginable. 'Neither can live while the other survives' – I will not let Tom be the one who dies. I won't.

The manor's doors opened and Victoria's laughter tinkled in the air. Harry's hearing informed him that they'd been sharing a joke about their respective jobs. Her heels clicked across the floor and Harry debated whether he should interrupt the two brothers.

He didn't have to, however, because he heard Tom relent over something, and Jonathan started running down the stairs to meet his parents. Hesitantly, Harry opened the door again, only to be greeted by the image of a brooding Tom.

He looked at Harry as he approached and said, "Jonathan is going to prepare them for the news." Harry restrained a show of skepticism, but Tom sensed it anyway. "It won't help very much, but it will be better than me ambushing them."

"What?" he heard a male voice bellow.

Harry winced. Tom suggested in a tone that was once again too casual to be true, "You should go back into the guest rooms. The thought of me bringing a wizard here will enrage my father, but seeing proof of it is bound to give him an aneurism." Successfully comparing the situation to the time when the Weasleys came over to Privet Drive, Harry shivered and took his advice.

"He," Mr. Riddle roared/hissed, "is here? In my house?"

"Honey-" Tom heard Victoria try to placate.

"This is unacceptable! He said he would be gone! Gone for good!"

Tom inhaled deeply and started walking to the double staircase until he was visible just behind the banister. Three pairs of eyes snapped

up to him and Tom opened his mouth to speak, but Mr. Riddle cut across him.

“You.” From years of practice, Tom didn’t flinch. “What have you done? Who else have you brought?”

Steeling himself for the explosions ahead, Tom fixed his voice to the ‘mild’ setting. “Hello father, Victoria.” He could literally feel any lingering traces of happiness in the room die. “I apologize for arriving without invitation, but-”

"I think you owe us more than an apology."

“Don’t blame Tom, dad!” Jonathan worriedly grabbed his father’s arm. “It’s not his fault that he’s coming!”

“’ Blame’ him? And who exactly is ‘coming’? You already have someone here – are you bringing more of them?”

“Dear,” Victoria started, but Riddle senior barley heard her.

“First you bring more of your kind here, and now something has happened, hasn’t it? And now you’re forcing us to feel the consequences!”

“Dad-”

“No, Jonathan. I want to hear him admit it.”

Tom didn’t answer for a while, feeling as if he’d been slapped, because it was true. He was forcing this upon them.

“Well?”

“...Hadrian just staged a coup de tat.”

Victoria’s eyes widened as blood drained from Mr. Riddle’s face. “But...but what are you going to do now? Do you need the blood wards to protect you?”

“Yes. But they only last until-”

“Until you turn seventeen,” Mr. Riddle finished as soon as he recovered. “And by that time, they’ll be outside waiting for you. You may as well leave, then. I’m sure you wizards can find better hiding places-”

“Stop it,” Victoria reprimanded sharply and he gaped in surprise. “He wouldn’t be here if this wasn’t a last resort. We can leave.”

“But-”

“We’ve been talking about taking a vacation for months, haven’t we?” she pointed out. “Why don’t we just take it now?” At his astounded face, she added, “This Dark Lord and his cohorts will come to our house either way. Even if Tom wasn’t here, we’d be in danger. That’s just the way wars work.”

“She’s right, dad,” Jonathan pounced on the chance to support her, even though he wasn’t completely sure what she meant in that last part.

Victoria wrapped her arms around Mr. Riddle and whispered, “I know you think it’s unfair, and it is, but we can’t do anything about it. Let’s pack up and leave. We’ll come back,” she glanced at Tom over her husband’s shoulder, who held up three fingers, “in three months or so.”

“You can hire tutors for me. I’m already ahead in school, so it won’t be too bad.”

Tom held his breath as his father considered. It had gone surprisingly well. And by that he meant that they hadn’t been on the verge of trading blows like they usually were. He didn’t trust his luck to hold out, but, amazingly, it did.

Finally, Riddle senior agreed. “Alright, we’ll go. But this house better be standing when we’re back! It’s been in the family for generations!”

Tom didn't want to make promises he couldn't keep. He highly suspected that whether he and Harry were still in the manor or not, it would be razed to the ground. Instead, he made a motion with his head that could have been interpreted a variety of ways, but his 'father' would probably consider an agreement.

Victoria and Mr. Riddle went to pack their belongings. Jonathan stopped just as he was about to go and instructed, "Kick his ass, big brother."

"Language!" Victoria admonished. She smiled sadly at Tom before drawing Jonathan away. Mr. Riddle didn't give any visible reaction.

Well, Tom sighed, I've gotten that over with. Now he had to figure everything else out. Tiredly, he trudged over to the guest room and balked slightly when he saw Harry watching him intensely from the window. "...They're leaving," he announced a bit uncomfortably. He had a feeling he knew what Harry was thinking – or wanted to ask – and he didn't like it.

Don't ask me, he prayed and turned to leave. It seemed that his prayer wasn't going to be answered, because Harry asked, "So what's the plan?"

Tom froze. "There are many aspects of this situation to consider. We shouldn't be hasty."

"Is that your roundabout way of saying you don't have one?"

He didn't receive an answer. Tom went to his room and shut the door.

Well, that makes everything better. Harry got the message though: I need to be alone. While he was the type of person who liked to plan with the people involved, Harry understood that Tom liked to be left to his own thoughts. And this is his battle. If that's how he wants to deal with it...that's how I should let it be.



Running a hand through his hair, he tried to slow his thundering heart. They were going to have to do something. They couldn't stay here forever. He could feel his campeador magic rushing through his muscles, preparing for a fight.

He got up and walked around the room to try to dispel the sudden adrenaline, an attempt that failed miserably.

Half an hour passed. The Riddles had left. He hadn't heard from Tom at all, except for the occational rapid pacing and light head bashing.

Then he suddenly opened Harry's door, as pale as Nearly Headless Nick. "Harry," Tom asked a little breathlessly, "how is it that you can speak Parseltongue when Hadrian cannot? Or...can he?"

While Harry thought the question was completely random, he saw no reason not to answer. "He can't," he confirmed and could have sworn he saw panic in Tom's eyes for a second. But that didn't make any sense - why would he want Hadrian to be a parselmouth? – so he dismissed it. "Dumbledore said it was because Voldemort transferred some of his powers to me on the night he killed my parents."

" 'Transferred'? That's...not possible. There is no spell, ritual, or theoretical reason why that should happen. Besides, if that were true, he would have transferred power, not an ability..."

Harry eyed him. "What are you trying to say?"

"I...don't know. I'm just...something the Map horcrux said made me...wonder..."

"Wonder what?"

"Never mind," he said far too quickly for Harry's taste. "I...have to think about this. Whatever caused this mental connection with Hadrian and I occurred with you and...Voldemort as well."

Harry figured he may as well bring up the prophecy now. He needed to know anything that could give him an edge here. "Hey...what did Trelawney say in this world?"

Distractedly, he replied, "You mean the prophecy?"

"Yeah. "

Tom really did not want to think about the prophecy right now. The more he did, the more he became aware of his mortality. From accidentally stumbling across a boggart in Malfoy Manor, Tom knew that his greatest fear was death. As if I needed a boggart to tell me that, he reflected bitterly. Still, he needed something to take his mind off what was practically suicide, and hearing Harry's version of the prophecy qualified as 'something'. "What does yours sound like?"

"It's 'The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches, born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies...and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not...and either must die by the hand of the other, for neither can live while the other survives'."

Tom smiled mirthlessly. "The prophecy in this world is similar, though there are obvious differences: 'The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches, born of the Snake's bloodline, born as the year dies...and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord has forsaken...and either must die by the hand of the other, for neither can live while the other survives'."

"Tom, what are we-" Harry stopped, since the Slytherin had already left. He would have been offended, if he didn't know what he was doing. Say what you want about denial, but in this case, it's keeping him sane, Harry thought.

He tried not to let out his frustration on the manor. It's all because of those stupid prophecies! The more Harry mulled it over, the more he felt like his life and Tom's had been one long death sentence waiting to happen.

What if he went back to his own world and things played out just the same? He was good, but he wasn't good enough to beat Voldemort. Maybe in a decade or so, but he doubted the Dark Lord would wait for Harry to play catch up.

But that might be months off. Tom had to do this now.

Movement at the corner of his eye caught his attention. "Merlin!" A squad of cloaked figures had just apparated in front of the manor. Harry swore, hoping Tom wouldn't notice, but knowing it was useless to hope.

Tom was logical – sometimes too logical. Harry had no doubt he'd concluded that there was no way he was going to beat Hadrian without divine intervention. And for the last half hour, he'd been trying to come to terms with that by himself, alone in that room.

"Screw this," Harry glowered and purposely made his way over to Tom's door and wrenched it open.

"Don't you know how to knock?" was the acerbic response once Tom had gotten over his surprise. "Get out-"

"You know I'll stand by you, right?" Harry would have had to be blind not to notice the paper-whiteness of Tom's skin. The other stiffened and Harry stepped closer. "You're not going to be alone in this. I'll do whatever I can, whatever it takes-"

"Potter, leave me alone-"

"We can do this. We can take him down! It's-"

"Don't-"

"I know there doesn't seem like much hope, but-"

"For goodness sake, Potter!" Tom exploded, leaping to his feet. "Just stop talking! Just because you think it's hopeless, doesn't mean I have to! Doesn't it occur to you that maybe, just maybe I'll walk out

of this alive?" He laughed, and he wasn't sure which of them the sound frightened more. "Maybe I'll live! Maybe I won't – won't kick the bloody bucket. Maybe Hell will open up and drag Hadrian back into that abyss he belongs to! Maybe he'll trip and fall in the way of a Killing Curse. Maybe he'll-

"Stop it," Harry hissed. "You're going insane!"

"Stop what? Lamenting over the prospect of my pitifully short life? Of all the people I'm going to leave behind? Of all the people I'm going to condemn to death for my failure?"

More laughter. Harry reached out to shake some sense into him, but Tom stumbled out of the way. "All my training," he half-sneered, half-laughed, "it was for nothing! My research – all the nights I stayed up practicing spells and dueling – useless! I'm going to walk in there, give a good show, and then the curtain will close, and I'll just be another dead body-

"Don't say that!" The words echoed Harry's own fears perfectly.

I am going to die. The words refused to stop whispering in Tom's mind. He's going to kill me. I'm going to die. I can't win against someone with so much of an advantage. He's going to kill me. I'm going to die.

He's going to kill me.

I'm going to die.

"Wait!" Harry broke through his hysteria.

"For what?" Vaguely, he noticed that the ex-Gryffindor managed to produce horror, relief, and indecision all at once. "A herculean feat."

"Huh?"

“What am I going to do?” he asked no one in particular, not hearing Harry’s question. As abruptly as it came, the hysteria was starting to fade, leaving him completely drained. Tom stopped, massaging his temples, and slowly sat back on his bed.

“Tom...” Harry broke off.

“You may as well go on, Harry.” He brought his knees to his chest, ordering himself to breathe. That’s right, take it easy. Breathe. Breathe...one breath at a time... “I’m... sorry you had to see me like that.”

“Like what? ‘Human’?”

“I meant...something else...”

Harry shook his head. “You don’t have to be perfect all the time. No one is.”

“Still...you have your own problems. I...I should have more control-”

“Git.” He grabbed his shoulder. “You’re not a robot. And I’m your friend.”

The two of them looked at each other, both surprised by the admission, even though it was clear to them that it had become true for a while now. “And you are mine,” Tom eventually said. “As odd as it is, considering...well, everything.” Harry shrugged. His life was Odd Incarnate. Befriending an alternate version of his arch-nemesis probably should have been expected, now that he thought about it.

Tom continued, “If you’re really going to do this with me, we’ll need a plan.” The same conflicted, horrified expression bloomed on Harry’s face. “What is it?”

Harry opened his mouth and then closed it. Should he even suggest this? The plan was insane. Utterly insane. It was the type of plan that was born out of fear and desperation. Those plans didn’t have a place in civil society.

“Go on. Say it. There’s no reason not to. ‘Anything’ is still ‘something’.” He hugged his knees. “But I don’t know how you can do it.”

“Do what?”

“Sacrifice yourself so easily.”

Harry snorted. “It’s never easy. I just have people that mean so much to me that I couldn’t do anything else. I have ideals, too, but to be honest, those are secondary. It’s the people. They’re the reason I fight and, if I need to...die.”

Tom thought of Bellatrix. And then Lucius, the friends at his school, and even, strangely enough, his family. Then he decided that Harry had a point. He didn’t know if he could do it; he was never hero-material. But...“What’s this idea of yours?”

Chewing his lip for a while, Harry admitted, “I think I know of a way we can kill Hadrian.”

“Please, Harry,” Tom sighed. “I don’t want to hear false hope.”

Harry still couldn’t believe he was even considering this. “I don’t think it’s false. I mean, it’s crazy and I don’t think I should even mention it – but it makes so much sense...and it kills two birds with one stone...”

Tom narrowed his eyes. “No more false hope, Harry. It just exacerbates everything. Trying to convince me that a mere schoolboy can win against the greatest Dark Lord of all time just makes it so much more obvious that it can’t-”

“Not a schoolboy,” Harry demurred, “but a Dark lord.”

All Tom’s thoughts slammed to a screeching halt. “What did you just say?”

“I said that two schoolboys can’t win against them, but...but...”

“But two Dark lords can.” Tom abruptly collapsed back onto his bed.

“Yeah...two Dark lords can...”

Tom stared back at the ceiling, a multitude of mixed emotions jutting through him. “You mean you want to get my...counterpart to complete the prophecy instead of me?”

This time it was Harry’s turn to laugh hysterically. “Yeah, that’s what I’m saying. I mean, the prophecies say their victims will be born at a certain time and that a Dark Lord will chose who they are, don’t they?”

“But,” Tom didn’t dare hope, “it says that he will ‘mark him as his equal’.”

“And he did. Just the wrong version.”

“...Do you think it counts even if he doesn’t have the scar?”

“I think so. Either way, Voldemort will be forced to fight Hadrian’s army. If he doesn’t kill Hadrian – or if Hadrian doesn’t kill him – their followers will be.”

Despite his attempts to fight it off, hope snuck through his defenses. Tom found himself saying, “Yes...and even if our interpretation is invalid, we can jump into the fight as soon as they’re getting tired...but what if they join forces instead?”

“...Didn’t think of that,” Harry muttered to his shoes in defeat.

Feeling much more alive now that there was a possibility that he wasn’t going to die, Tom bolted up. “Wait, no! That won’t happen at all.” A smile somehow managed to climb onto his face. “Even if they did join forces, they have completely different ideologies! An alliance would cause a lack of cohesion – not to mention that their chain of command would be ruined. They couldn’t possibly work together!” His voice became more animated, the words pouring out at an ever-

increasing pace. “Furthermore, neither of them would call a truce with each other because it would be easier to eliminate each other without one. If anything, they would join with our side!”

Harry’s brow crinkled. “Could you explain that to me?”

“I’ll give an example. Let’s say that Hadrian has sixty soldiers and Voldemort and Dumbledore each have thirty. If Voldemort doesn’t join anyone, he’ll have to divide his forces fighting on two fronts and essentially ensure defeat. If he joins with Dumbledore, on the other hand, his forces are a match for Hadrian’s and he has a chance of getting rid of his Dark Lord competitor. If everything in theory occurs in reality, then Dumbledore’s remaining forces will roughly match Voldemort’s. They will have an approximately even showdown. However, if Voldemort joins Hadrian, he’ll easily eliminate Dumbledore and then be slaughtered by Hadrian. Two Dark lord’s can’t rule the Wizarding World at the same time; they have a conflict of interest. So, you see, it’s in his best interest to join us.” I might survive this after all.

Harry wasn’t sure how he felt about working together with Voldemort, but the rest was perfectly alright with him. However...“We’d be using your world as a battleground.”

Reluctantly, Tom nodded. “I doubt we can bring Hadrian into your world; it has to be mine. Besides...I imagine that if I was a Dark lord, I would rule through fear and little pretense of ideals. If that is the case in your world, then the Death Eaters there will disperse as soon as their Dark lord dies. However, the people in mine probably won’t. If there is a way to make that happen, though, Hadrian has to be defeated here, where they can all see it.”

Thinking of the people he came to know and would be affected by this decision, Harry felt his stomach churn.

“This is necessary, Harry,” Tom said as he watched him. “There is no other way.”



Harry wanted to protest and say there was. Instead, he settled for: "Voldemort won't be happy. He'll vent his anger on Muggles...and Muggleborns."

"We have to think of the needs of the many. They outweigh the needs of the few." His voice lacked emotion. Harry knew it wasn't because he didn't feel anything, but because he was trying not to. He wanted to look at this clinically – logically.

Harry closed his eyes, part of him wishing he could be so...detached when he needed to, and another part revolted at the idea. How come he had to decide this? He was practically deciding the fates of who knows how many people here. I'm not qualified to make this decision. He sighed. But I guess no one is.

"How many more people will die if we don't do this?" Tom asked. "We have to ensure that the least amount of people suffer. It isn't just the present we have to think about, either; what of future generations? Do you honestly believe that Hadrian or Voldemort will be benevolent tyrants? We cannot allow Voldemort's empire or Hadrian's farce of a republic to continue. We have to do this."

"...Alright. I'm in. Let's do this."

"I presume you have a way to take us to your world?"

Harry fingered the necklace around his neck. "I know I can get back with this. But I don't know how to make it work," he confessed sheepishly.

Tom raised an eyebrow. "Oh? How did you arrive here in the first place?"

"Luna put it around my neck and said some word. 'Incep' something. Incep..tem? Incepta? Er..."

"Incepto?" Tom offered.

"Yeah! That's the word. How'd you know?"

“Roughly, it’s the Latin equivalent for ‘begin’. It would make sense that the incantation to bring us there would either be ‘incepto’ again, or one of the Latin words for ‘end’.”

“I tried ‘incepto’ a day after I first arrived; it didn’t work.” He paused and then added, “You should know that this necklace isn’t going to work after this.”

“Excuse me?”

“Luna said that it will bring me to another dimension and back only once. That means if we want to get back here, one of us will have to be the Master of my world’s Deathly Hallows.”

Tom scowled. “And you decided to bring up this minor detail now?”

“Hey, I know where all the Hallows are!” Harry defended. “My invisibility cloak-” he motioned to the room he’d just come from, “is one, Slytherin’s Ring is another, and...” He trailed off.

“And?” Tom prompted.

Harry looked away. “The Elder Wand...I can’t rob Professor Dumbledore’s grave. I can’t.”

“The headmaster is dead in your dimension?” Tom gaped.

“Yeah. He is.”

The curt tone signaled the end to that topic. Tom, who had already devised a solution, simply said, “We’ll deal with that problem when it becomes pertinent. Right now, we have a nontraditional vacation to take. Let’s start packing, shall we?”

A/N: OK, I bet you're all wondering what the deal is with me and my nonexistent updates. The sparknotes version: college. I just started, and it's taking me a while to get into the swing of things. I won't abandon this story though, so those of you who are worrying don't

need to :) Hopefully this chapter didn't have too many rough spots; I'm looking ahead at my schedule for next week and it looks packed, and I didn't want to make you guys wait another week for this. For strict canon lovers out there, technically Tom should be the eldest in his year, not the youngest (due to the cutoff date), but I figured that Dumbledore would want him to come to Hogwarts as soon as possible.

Anyway, I'd love it if you could tell me anything you liked in this chapter. Thanks to everyone who review the last one!

Disclaimer: The status of my ownership over Harry Potter hasn't changed from the last chapter. And my Latin 'skills' rely completely on online translators, so no one should take the spells I've made up as grammatically correct.

Tom blamed temporary insanity for why he was going along with this plan, which he was already starting to suspect was actually a highly intricate and over-glorified suicide recipe in disguise. After all, it had all the markings of stereotypical Gryffindor audacity.

Markings? Why don't we just admit it and call it what it really is: incarnation.

Ironically enough, Harry mused the same train of thought out loud. "You know, I'm surprised you're not criticizing this more. It's even brasher and bolder than Dumbledore's robes."

"Desperate times call for desperate measures."

"...Are you seriously trying to put a Slytherin spin on this?"

Tom sighed. "Let's just...do this." He really didn't need to be reminded of the possible consequences of their Hadrianesque scheme. They had agreed to do it; they had no better options.

"Engorgio." The string of the necklace enlarged and Harry hooked it around his and Tom's necks. "So what's the Latin word for 'end'?"

"There are several. I'll list them until the necklace's magic activates. Termino-" He gasped as pressure from all directions seized his body; for a second he was blind and he instinctively let out a shout, only to realize that he couldn't.

Hearing vanished. The sense of touch deserted him less than a second after.

The pressure turned slick before disappearing. Suddenly, everything was back to normal, and Tom stumbled toward, trying to regain his footing.

“Ugh,” Harry groaned next to him as he unhooked the necklace. “I’ll never get used to that feeling.”

Shaking himself, Tom opened his eyes...and froze. The walls were peeling and grey. Dust smothered the furniture and cracks ran rampant over the room. A gnarled ivy tentacle clutched the windowpane like the hand of a starved inferius.

“What,” he vaguely noticed that he was whispering, “happened to this place?”

Harry had strode to the creaking open door but stopped once he heard the question. Tom gave the room a final, horrified survey before turning his gaze on Harry.

“You. You happened to this place.” Uncomfortably, he Shrank the necklace.

“Me?”

“Voldemort,” he amended. “It hasn’t had any living inhabitation for years, so you can see why it got a little...” He gestured around him. “Messy.”

“What do you mean?” Tom asked sharply. “What about my brother? Victoria? My...father?”

Harry started to soften the blow, but realized there was no point. What was the use in coddling him? He had to learn eventually. “They were killed.”

There was a strained silence where Harry knew that he understood exactly what he was saying. Tom’s jaw clenched; Harry had told him that he was the Dark Lord in this dimension, but seeing proof of it...“We should keep moving.”

“He’s not you. Just remember that.”

“I will,” he returned with more confidence than he felt. Harry motioned to the door and Tom quickly followed him.

Every second he stayed in the manor seemed to reveal some new atrocity. Looking down the stairs and through the nearest window, he noticed trees using their leaves to maul the house. Weeds leaped out of the lawn and he felt an odd satisfaction in seeing them that way, knowing how furious his pseudo-father would be.

Stop it! he reprimanded himself. That is exactly the reaction your...counterpart would have.

Harry winced, his hand automatically coming up to rub his forehead. It was odd; ever since he arrived, it was like he could actually feel Voldemort’s mind bordering his. For a split second, he felt wind whipping his sides, rain pelting his cloak, and icy determination before the sensations vanished.

And speaking of Voldemort...“Tom,” Harry started, “we-” He broke off, grimacing.

“What is it?”

“I - argh!”

Alarmed, Tom grabbed Harry’s shoulders as he began to sink onto one knee. Harry’s eyes seemed to mist over and his teeth gritted. “What is it?” He quickly knelt in front of him, forcing the Gryffindor to meet his gaze. “Harry-”

“I never had it!”

Tom frowned. Had..what? Oh! He extricated Harry’s hand from his forehead before his fingernails could start cutting his skin. I see. He’s having a scar-vision. Harry started laughing and Tom winced. And a

particularly awful one, if his sudden multiple personality disorder is any indicator.

Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop!

Tom's head jerked up and his wand was immediately in his hand. Apparation, he recognized, attention flying to the dark, cloaked, and masked figures that had materialized on the lawn.

Who are-?

"There!" one of them cried jovially, spying the two boys through the window. "There they are! Bombarda!"

Salazar! Tom threw a Banishing Charm in front of him as the window exploded and glass catapulted towards them. "Confringo!" he snapped as the wizards started pouring through their newly created entrance. "Get up, Harry-" He struggled to tow him away, but a jet of red light flung in his direction forced him to abandon his attempt and deflect the spell.

Slinking away wasn't going to work – it was time to change tactics. Planting himself in front of Harry, he shot off spell after spell. Hopefully, Harry would recover and they could get out of this unexpected ambush.

Harry wrenched himself out of the vision's grip with all the will-power he could muster. The gigantic, fortress-looking building 'he' had been in melted away but pain still crippled his concentration. He seized Tom's wrist. "A-apparate!"

"Reducto!"

Protego, sectumsempra, Tom fired. Hogsmeade – I want to take us to Hogsmeade. With that destination in mind, he called up his magic. The Death Eaters rained down a final barrage of curses before he side-long apparated Harry into the outskirts of the Wizarding village.

Harry hit the ground as they reappeared, taking in a deep breath to soothe the vaguely suffocating apparation side effects.

“Harry..?”

Gingerly, he stood. “I’m fine. Your Dark Lord self was feeling social. He wanted to be included in my welcoming committee.”

“Cute. Very cute. But let’s be serious for a moment: what did you see?”

“He was flying towards this massive stone tower.” After a pause, he added, “There was a man inside. He wanted something from him, but the man said he didn’t have it. So he killed him.”

“That’s...illuminating...” Tom muttered. Then he asked, “Did you say ‘flying’?”

“It’s news to me, as well. He didn’t have a broom or anything.”

“Impressive.”

“Don’t,” Harry scowled, “compliment him.”

“Well, you have to admit, flight without the assistance of any sort of magical object is a remarkable-”

“What I’d like to know,” he interrupted loudly, “is how those Death Eaters just happened to apparate to Little Hangleton practically the moment we arrived. You don’t think there are some sort of detection wards on Riddle Manor, do you?”

Tom, accepting the change of subject, replied, “If you gave my counterpart any reason to think you’d go there, then yes. Otherwise I highly doubt it.”

“Great. A mystery. Perfect timing.”



“One we’ll have to put on the shelf for now. We have to retrieve the Elder Wand.”

Harry started. As he scanned the quiet village blanketing the landscape in front of them, he realized where they were...and what lay ahead. “We can’t! Dumbledore’s grave-”

“I said I had a solution to that, didn’t I?” was the smooth reminder.

Harry immediately became suspicious. When Tom said something smoothly, it either meant he was going to pull something stereotypically Slytherin or he was being evasive. Harry wasn’t sure which option was worse. “I’m not going to like this ‘solution’, am I?”

“Whatever makes you say such a thing?”

“You’re answering a question with a question,” Harry accused.

“Am-?” Tom cut himself off before he did it again. Somewhere along the way, Harry must have talked to Bellatrix. “Come. We don’t have time to waste. Put on your Invisibility Cloak; we don’t know what happened while you were gone. We can’t risk being seen.” Harry closed his mouth before the temptation to start a mini interrogation became too much. He reversed the side his Cloak was flipped to and it instantly went from being a silvery cloak to turning him invisible.

Tom cast a Disillusionment Charm on himself and reached out until he was grasping Harry’s wrist. “So we don’t get separated,” he explained.

Harry took a step forward. “Follow me; I know a short cut.” Knowing Harry, Tom briefly wondered if this shortcut involved all sorts of unpleasantness, but decided he didn’t want to know. Instead, he let Harry tug him around Hogsmeade and tried not to bump into the inhabitation.

A watchful, cautious air saturated the village. Tom could have sworn that people were skulking about as if they were trying to flee for

shelter. A few figures stood outside the stores, faces guarded and hands drifting by their wands.

What happened here? Looking around, Tom spotted the end of a Daily Prophet sticking out of a trashcan. His inner Lucius wrinkled its nose in disapproval of what he was going to do, but Tom ignored it. If the Hogsmeade inhabitants were trudging about like victims of a war, he was going to find out why.

Tightening his hold on Harry to let him know he was going to stop, Tom gently steered them in the direction of the unwholesome trashcan. Flipping a glance over his shoulder to see if anyone was watching, he reached out and nicked the newspaper. "Evanescio," he murmured and the disgruntled Lucius incarnation went from condemning to just disapproving. He stuffed it inside his robes so that the Disillusionment would mask it as well and gave Harry's wrist a squeeze to let him know he was done.

Seeing that Tom was done dumpster diving, Harry started walking them through the various secret passageways in Hogsmeade until they emerged from the Shrieking Shack and stumbled onto Hogwarts grounds.

Tom dispelled the Charm and stared up at Hogwarts as it loomed in front of him. Outwardly, it looked exactly the same as his Hogwarts. But inwardly...

I wonder who will be sitting at the House tables? McGonagall must be headmistress...I wonder what else is different?

Harry pulled off the cloak and wrapped the other side around himself again. He wanted to stand there and just look at Hogwarts – his Hogwarts – for a while, but forced himself not to. He couldn't go in now; he had an objective to accomplish.

Tom seemed to be thinking the same thing because he pulled out the newspaper and peered at the top headline.

"Keeping up with current events?"

“Exactly. Oh, look,” he remarked with only a little surprise. “You’ve made the front page.”

“What?” Harry reached for the paper, which Tom passed to him with a dry, “Congratulations.” Sure enough, his picture was staring back at him, occasionally adjusting his glasses, determination etched in his features and posture. Harry let out a low whistle as he noticed the cash reward printed above the photo.

“Now, the question we have to ask is whether that price is there for information...or for your capture.”

“You think it’s a bounty?”

“No offense, Harry, but I doubt anyone would offer that many galleons for information on your whereabouts and have benevolent motives. Although the Boy Who Lived is an important symbolic figure, he isn’t worth that sum.” He tapped the page. “We should read the article beneath it. Still, I’m guessing that the Ministry in this world has found Voldemort to be very...persuasive.”

Harry glanced at the price again. “Well, it’s nice to know I’m that big of an annoyance, at least. Let me see this...”

A splash told Tom that they were approaching the Lake. He looked up from the paper in Harry’s hands and almost stopped in his tracks when he spotted the brilliant white tomb by its banks. Moonlight drizzled from the sky, its ghostly light igniting the headmaster’s resting place to molten silver.

His heart thudded against his chest. He really did die. It seemed that his stomach had chosen that time to vanish. Tom continued ahead stiffly, wondering if it had been Voldemort who had done the deed. Was he the one who rid the world of such a great man?

He couldn’t say that Dumbledore and he were incredibly close, but Tom saw him as a mentor. Despite what people may think about the headmaster, he was surprisingly aware of the darker sides of human nature and had no grandiose ideas on what being the Chosen One

entailed. He had been there ever step of the way to guide Tom if he felt like he needed it.

To think that he had been responsible for the death of someone who had been such a significant force in his life...

“Apparently,” Harry was saying, “I’m Undesirable Number One. And I’ve been missing for the past few months.”

“Shocking,” Tom distracted himself by offering some sarcastic commentary.

“The Minister is some guy named ‘Pius Thicknesse’.”

“Thicknesse? He was a notable political figure in my world.”

Harry peered at him over the rim of the paper. “So he’s a Death Eater?”

“Not necessarily. What are the other headlines?” Harry read a few of them off and Tom felt a twinge of guilt beginning even though he knew he wasn’t responsible for this. A Muggleborn Registration Committee? Muggleborns stealing magic? What did my counterpart do – read Mein Kampf? he thought in disgust. “I see. Are those new legislations out of character for your Ministry?”

“Rounding up Muggleborns? Definitely. The Ministry might be prejudiced, but not to this extent. It reeks of Death Eater influence.”

“Or Imperius.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “So there’s no doubt, then. The Ministry is just a puppet government now.” He mulled it over for a second before saying, “I don’t see why Voldemort doesn’t just declare himself emperor or whatever title he wants people to call him. Everyone knows what’s happening. How could they not?”

“Ah,” Tom drawled as he eyed the tomb again, “but that would destroy the delightful and pervasive fear and uncertainty poisoning

the echelons of society.” Harry’s face scrunched up in revulsion but slipped into solemn when he finally saw the tomb.

None of them spoke as Tom took slow steps forward. Harry was rooted to the spot, unable to stop seeing Dumbledore’s last moments and the snap of green that had snatched his life away.

Wind sighed through the Forbidden Forest and Tom eventually asked, “Is this it?”

It seemed sacrilegious to break the silence, but Harry let out a breath and made himself answer. “Yeah. That’s Dumbledore’s resting place.” His eyes dropped to his shoes and he murmured, “I wish I had something to bring. Something that wasn’t Conjured. I meant to come back to visit him alone at some point. I still am, I suppose...but not for the reasons I’d like.”

Yes...breaking into Dumbledore’s tomb might put a damper on this reunion, wouldn’t it? Shaking himself out of those thoughts, Tom gripped his wand. “If the Dumbledore in his universe was anything like mine, he would understand. He spent the majority of his life making sacrifices for the needs of the many.”

Harry shrugged. “I suppose.”

Tom let an appropriate pause play out before he turned. “I’m going to crack it open now,” he told him.

“What? No!”

“Harry. It needs to be done.”

“We can’t rob his tomb, Tom. We can’t.” Harry didn’t like the assessing gaze he was treated to and suddenly he knew what Tom’s ‘plan’ was. “You were going to wait until I was distracted and then open it, weren’t you?” The answering flinch was all he needed to confirm his hypothesis. If it had been a few months before, he wouldn’t have been able to see it, but now it was as clear as day.

Tom defended, "We've gotten this far - we have to keep going or it will all be for nothing. The only way we can go back is if we have the Elder Wand." He pointed at the tomb. "Dumbledore has the Elder Wand. You know how this is going to go." Harry cradled his head in his hands. Fighting down a fresh spring of self-loathing, Tom lifted his wand –

"No. Stop."

"Harry-"

"I know. I'll do it."

Tom stared at him. "You don't have to. I know you don't-"

"You don't want to do this either, but it isn't fair to ask this of you. He's my headmaster – my mentor. I'll do it. My choice; my responsibility." He walked up to the tomb and Tom slowly nodded.

Harry trained his gaze on the grave. Swallowing, he aimed his wand. "I'm sorry. Adhaero."

A deafening screech stabbed the night as a monstrous crack snaked down the center of the tomb. The two halves ripped each other apart, exposing the body laying beneath. Harry's breath caught in his throat. Dumbledore seemed to be sleeping, his hands wrapped around a fifteen inch wand.

Icy fingers wrapped around his heart and Harry was dosed in an eerie calm. He reached out and pried the fingers open, not even shuddering as he brushed over the arctic flesh. Carefully, Harry slipped the wand out.

"Propinquus."

He didn't move as Tom's spell caused the tomb to meld together with a series of crunches.

"You did what needed to be done."

Harry smiled mirthlessly. "That doesn't make me feel any better about this." Suddenly, he cocked his head to the side. Was it his imagination? No, it wasn't – footsteps were racing in their direction. Harry didn't have a lot of practice estimating how many people there were, but he'd say there were at least five.

Five people were chasing them. Why did he get the impression that this wasn't a group of fans?

"Alright," he announced in irritation, "this can't be a coincidence!"

"There are more people coming after us?" Tom asked incredulously. "More Death Eaters who know where we are?"

Harry started jogging towards the Shrieking Shack and Tom didn't need encouragement to follow. "Either Voldemort has developed some way to give his followers ESP, or there's some really sneaky spell going on that's telling him where we are." The two of them tore up the hill just as a stream of figures became visible, cascading out of Hogwarts like some ungodly battalion of ants.

The Whomping Willow detected them and waved its branches. Harry, who had long since decided he'd run out of patience for threats, pointed his wand in the direction of its Achilles Heel and sent out a wide-range, low-power reducto. Red light fanned out and nudged the Willow's roots.

Tom let out a breath of relief as it stilled and Harry and he crawled into the Shack and started down the passage back to Hogsmeade. "Are they following us?"

Harry shook his head. "No. We can stop running now. No one knows this passageway." He slowed to a walk, running a hand through his hair and crossed his arms. "We have to think about this. There is no way that Voldemort put a Tracker on me, so there has to be some other explanation." Abruptly, he stopped. "What in blazes?" He whirled around. "They're following us!"

“...Let’s hope the Willow will stave them off for a while.” Tom bit his lip as he thought. If there is no spell on us, then it has to be some sort of detection spell on the areas we’ve been on so far. Is it detecting our magical signatures? Possibly...but if that was true, why didn’t those Death Eaters apparate after us as soon as we arrived in Hogsmeade? He flashed back to his readings...“Taboo!”

Harry jumped at the sudden noise and gave him a weird look. “Um...ok...I suppose if you really want to lighten the mood that much, we can play...”

“What? No! I don’t want to play taboo – I mean that’s probably why Vol – he is able to track us. Don’t say his name!” he interjected before Harry could open his mouth. “If he placed a Taboo on his name, then anytime someone said it, he would know where they were. Since the only people who would say his name are a few Order members and yourself...well...”

Harry’s face lit with understanding. “You’re a genius.” He received a smirk in reply and was about to tell him not to let it go to his head when his scar started throbbing. He braced himself for another unpleasant scene in the Dark Lord’s life when he realized that it wasn’t because of that.

Voldemort was here. “Merlin!”

“What is it?”

“Vol – You Know Who is here. In Hogwarts! But why-” Now he felt a vision coming on. Not again –

As soon as he thought the words, the dank passage under the Shack disappeared and he was staring down at Dumbledore’s tomb, rage erupting inside him.

“It’s gone!” he hissed, blazing red eyes locked on the conspicuously absent wand in Dumbledore’s hands. “Gone!”

“M-my Lord...” one of his Death Eaters blubbered.



“Crucio!”

“Aaarrgh!”

As the man writhed on the ground, Voldemort’s thoughts raced. Who has it? Who stole it? Do they know about the Hallows? Who could have known? The Curse fired up with even more intensity. I need that wand!

Harry managed to yank himself out and sagged against the wall. “He...” he panted, a trickle of sweat running down his neck, “knows about the Hallows.”

Tom’s eyes widened. “How?”

“I don’t...know. But we have to...go.”

Helping Harry to his feet, Tom pushed open the passage’s exit. “Alright,” he shut the door once they were through, “it seems like we have even more to deal with than we anticipated. My counterpart knows about and is searching for the Hallows, you’re a fugitive, and we need that Ring.”

Groaning, Harry revealed, “Before I was sucked into your world, Ron, Hermione and I were going to search for all the horcruxes. The Ring was once a horcrux, but I don’t know what Dumbledore did with it. He might have planned to give it to me in his will, but he could have just as easily donated it to a museum. The soul fragment in it was destroyed, so mission-wise, there’s no point in keeping it.”

A chill rose in Tom at the idea of him creating a horcrux, but he ignored it. He could wallow in horror later. “Knowing what he does about the Ring, Dumbledore wouldn’t have entrusted it to anyone but you.”

“You think he would have told me what it was?”

“Probably not.” Tom stilled as his apocalyptic theory nudged him. If it’s true...and Merlin I hope it isn’t...than he would...to give him hope. Out loud, he continued, “What would be the point? He couldn’t have predicted that my counterpart would search for them. The Deathly Hallows are widely believed to be fairytales, after all.”

Harry was a little miffed about Tom's prediction, but he brushed it aside. “So what would happen if Dumbledore’s will said to give me the Ring but I was no longer there to retrieve it?”

“You won’t like the answer.”

“I’m starting to think I’m never going to like Hallow-related answers.”

Tom sighed. “Given the political climate I could glean from the papers, it would become property of the Ministry.”

“What? That’s outrageous! It’s mine! It should go to the people I indicated in my will!”

“True, but you are a wanted man now. As far as the puppet Ministry is concerned, you have no rights, will or otherwise.”

So my only hope of getting that ring is if somehow Ron and Hermione convinced some Ministry high up to be merciful? “That’s a load of rubbish.”

“I agree, though since we have little choice in the matter, we may as well find someone who knows what became of that Ring and start taking steps to obtain it.”

Harry placed the Elder Wand in a holster attached to his left arm. “Well, if your logic holds true, then Ron and Hermione should know the answer to that.” He threw the Cloak over himself, which left his head to float in a rather disturbing fashion in midair. “I don’t want to get them involved in all this, but I don’t think we have a choice. They’ll probably be in Grimmauld Place...if they aren’t out looking for horcruxes.”

Tom Disillusioned himself. "Do you think it's likely that they'll use Grimmauld Place as a base?"

"Very likely. I don't know how long we'll have to wait for them to show up...or if they've been captured." He looked away. If they had been captured, he wouldn't be able to stop blaming himself. Without a doubt, he'd start thinking 'if I'd been there, maybe I could have...' over and over again.

"...If they'd been apprehended," Tom made an attempt at comfort that made him wince. He was never very good at this. "The story would have appeared in the Prophet." He gestured to the newspaper in Harry's pockets.

"Sure, but that doesn't mean the story would have appeared in this particular Prophet," Harry responded. "Let's just get to Grimmauld Place."

After skirting through Hogsmeade until they'd passed the border of anti-apparation wards, the two of them apparated and reappeared on the street outside Sirius' old house. "I don't see anything," Tom told him, still invisible, as they peered up at where Harry was looking. "Is it under Fidelus?"

"Exactly. So..." He took out his wand and wrote in the air in a fiery script that did nothing to stop Chamber of Secrets memories: 'The Order of the Phoenix is at Number 12, Grimmauld Place'. When Tom nodded, he dissipated the letters. "Alright, let's go in-"

"Wait," Tom grabbed his seemingly disembodied arm. "How are you going to explain me?"

"What do you mean? No one's going to recognize you."

Well, that certainly raised more questions than it answered. "Why not?"

“Er...let’s just say that Vol – You Know Who underwent an extreme makeover at some point in time. Trust me; no one will recognize you. Anyone who would is at Hogwarts.” Or dead.

Harry started up the stairs and, from the mild tapping of shoes that followed, guessed that Tom was right behind him. He opened the door and blinked when he saw someone in front of them and realized he had no idea who it was.

“The Dark Lord is having his fun with the brats,” whoever it was gloated. Harry couldn’t see his expression since the man’s back was facing him, but he didn’t need to. The tone of his voice was enough – he was relishing the news.

What he is-? Suddenly, Tom seized Harry, pulled him out of the house, and shut the door. Harry pulled off the Cloak. “What was that for?”

“That man,” Tom stated, “is a Death Eater.”

Harry was about to deny this but the pieces fell into place less than a second later. “...Bollocks.”

Tom saw no reason to contradict him. “It looks like your base has been compromised.”

“Wait,” Harry unconsciously raised his voice. “He was talking about two people and the Dark Lord – and – and Ron and Hermione-!”

It took all Tom’s strength to hold Harry back when he lunged for the door. “No! Don’t!” Curse campeadori power! “Harry, you can’t-!”

“He knows what happened to my friends! I’m going to make him tell me-”

“Think about this first! You can’t just charge in – we need a plan!”

“I have a plan – bust in and interrogate!”

“Unacceptable. We don’t know how many people are in there.”

“We can beat them!”

“But it would be better if we lured them outside.” Slowly, Harry stilled. Tom didn’t dare remove his death-grip on him until he felt his muscles relax. When they finally did, he asked quietly, “Are we in agreement?”

“...Yes. We are.” He glowered at the door one last time before turning to Tom. “OK, how about we take a page out of the Death Eater’s book and blast one of those windows? A bunch of them will come outside; we can be under Disillusionment. They’ll either send a couple of people out to investigate or they’ll split up into small groups to check the area. We’ll pick off one of them and get the answers we’re looking for one way or another.”

Tom gave an elegant shrug. “It works.” He cast the spell over himself as Harry threw his Cloak on again.

They retreated across the street to the small alley running between two houses. Harry aimed for a window several silhouettes were slinking behind. “Reducto.”

Smash!

An array of colorful vocabulary emitted in response to his vandalism. “Just like clockwork,” he muttered as one of the shadows immediately barked out orders. Three Death Eaters charged out of the house, wands raised. They scoured the street, cautiously venturing farther away from the house. Tom and Harry didn’t move.

Finally, one announced, “I don’t see anyone.”

“They’re there,” the man who had given the orders growled. “They must be Order members; only they would be keyed into the Fidelus. Spread out.” Gruff Leader, as Harry dubbed him, stalked ahead to Tom and Harry’s hiding place while his cronies veered off in opposite directions.

“Get ready,” he heard Tom mutter. “If he tries a homenum revelio...” He didn’t need to finish. If that happened, it could cause too much commotion and then they’d have all three Death Eaters closing in on them. They would have to attack him as soon as they suspected he’d use that spell.

They held their breathes as Gruff Leader stormed by. As soon as his back was turned, Tom shot off a nonverbal Stunner, and the man collapsed on the ground. “Accio,” Harry whispered. The unconscious body shot towards him. Harry stood and let it float into the middle of the alley. He dumped him onto the floor and quickly strode up to him, discarding his cloak as he did so. “Incarcerous. Muffliato.” Tom assigned himself guard duty and stationed himself just within the bounds of Harry’s spell to hear what was being said. “Enervate.”

Gruff Leader groaned and opened his eyes, which immediately widened upon seeing the famous scar etched on Harry’s forehead. “Potter!”

Harry’s lip curled. “Yes, that’s right. Potter – Harry Potter. And I would so love it if you answered my questions.” Gruff Leader responded with a suggestion that was anatomically unlikely. “I hate to disappoint you, but that isn’t going to happen. Tell me where my friends are.” When the man started laughing, Harry seized the front of his robes. “Tell me,” he demanded, “what he’s done with them!”

“Ha! When the Dark Lord comes, you’ll be – aaargh!” His entire body bent over to lessen the pain of the control grip Harry had put on his hand. The Death Eater flipped himself over as Harry twisted his palm ever so slightly and desperately climbed to his feet as Harry raised it upwards.

“Tell me.”

“Screw you, Potter!” Harry adjusted the angle of his hold and Gruff was practically dancing on his tiptoes to keep his wrist from snapping.

Tom glanced back and was surprised that all that yelling had not even been caused by a wand. As he watched, he considered that

Harry was emotionally compromised - he'd probably do something excessive and Tom didn't want him to feel any more disgust with himself than he had to. "Harry," he began in Parseltongue, "that man isn't going to break under pain. Let me try another method."

Harry twisted the Death Eater's hand one more time before realising his hold. He cast a contemptuous glare when the Death Eater collapsed on the pavement and struggled to sit up. "Fine. Be my guest," he returned in clipped tones.

Tom smoothly kneeled in front of the Death Eater, who flinched away from him. There was no recognition in his expression, but Tom detected a twinge of fear. "Ah," he drawled, "I see you are familiar with Parseltongue?"

"Who are you?"

"I'm afraid I'll be asking the questions here," Tom replied unrepentantly and grabbed the side of the man's head, forcing him to look directly into his eyes. "Now...tell me what I want to know..." He dove into the Death Eater's mind, tearing apart occlumency shields and tossing aside irrelevant memories. Where is it? Which memory holds the answers?

Harry jerked as the man screamed, thrashing in an useless effort to free himself from Tom's legilimency assault. Finally, the man stopped struggling and Tom let him drop to the floor. "Stupefy." He stood. "Harry, I know where they are."

Brushing away the image of the ferocity of the attack, Harry nodded. "Where?"

"Malfoy Manor. It appears that...Ronald and Hermione were traveling together and were ambushed by a man named Fenir Greyback. They were recognized."

Ice slipped down Harry's back as he imagined what that meant for his two friends. "How long have they been there?" he asked with dread.

“Three days. They’re alive,” Tom added quickly. “I suspect Vol – my counterpart means to use them against you somehow.”

“We have to get in that Manor.” Harry paced. “We have to free them.”

“There’s another complication. We need to...” he hesitated. “We need to kill whoever killed Dumbledore. The Elder Wand will only work for whoever defeated him.” But...what if that person was Voldemort? After all, who else had the power to defeat the man who had singlehandedly vanquished the last Dark lord?

If that was true, then their plan had been for nothing...

“ ‘Defeating’ isn’t the same as ‘killing’,” Harry pointed out. “Now that I think about it, Snape was the one who ended up killing Dumbledore, but Draco was the one who first caught Dumbledore by surprise and Disarmed him.” He smirked. “This is brilliant – we’ll be taking care of three things at once. If we can get into Malfoy Manor, we can free my friends, get the Resurrection Stone, and obtain the Elder Wand’s allegiance in one move!”

“Assuming Murphy’s Law doesn’t decide to have a go at us.”

“Considering how many times I’ve survived out of pure luck, I don’t think we’ll have to worry about it. Murphy’s Law declared war on Volde – You Know Who a long time ago. So how are we going to get to the Manor? Do you think you can apparate us there?”

“With all the magical protection on the Malfoy home, I doubt I can apparate us directly inside. Your Dark lord might be keyed into the wards, so I could get in, but I wouldn’t be able to take you with me. I could get us to the area nearby, though.”

“And then we storm the place?” Harry shook his head. “I’m not a ward breaker and even if you are, it would take a lot of time. I guess we could camp out...no. That would take too long. What about brute force? Can we just punch through the wards?”



“Possibly. We’re both powerful wizards. However, Malfoy Manor appears to be the Dark Lord’s headquarters, which means we would be too weak to defeat the onslaught of Death Eaters that would no doubt be summoned as soon as they realized what we were trying to do.”

Harry glanced over his shoulder as he started to hear the other Death Eaters coming back. He swished his wand and Gruff Leader slid to the side of the alley. “We’ve got company.”

“Wait.” Tom Banished the ropes tied around him. “Obliviate. Confundo. Enervate.” The two now invisible teens watched as the Death Eater they’d interrogated groggily picked himself up, face scrunched up in confusion, before ambling off.

As Gruff Leader served around the corner, Tom heard a bodiless voice ask, “Have any bright ideas to get us into Vol – You Know Who’s base?”

Tom opened his mouth to reply a negative, when inspiration struck, courtesy of Harry’s quick change in wording. “Actually, yes.” He smiled. “Why go through all the trouble breaking into the Manor when we can just as easily come in as welcomed guests?”

Harry’s head appeared. “What are you talking about?”

“If we let ourselves be captured, they’ll bring us inside.”

The surprise melted away. Harry pointed out, “They’ll take away our wands, torture us, and then throw us in whatever they’re passing off as holding cells until You Know Who arrives. We’d be inside, but we’d be defenseless.”

“Not exactly,” Tom countered, indicating the holster where the Elder Wand was stored. “The general consensus is that only the most paranoid of people carry two wands. I doubt the Death Eaters will expect mere students to be among that number. If we Disillusion the Wand and hide it in a place they wouldn’t check even if they did frisk us...”

“Like where? Our boots?”

“...That isn’t a bad idea, Harry. If we Disillusion the holster and use a Sticking Charm to Stick it to the inside of the boot’s side, the wand wouldn’t fall out if they forced us to take our shoes off and the wand wouldn’t break.”

Harry grumbled, “I think you’re forgetting the part where this is extremely uncomfortable for me.”

“We can always make your shoes larger.”

“Right. Because wearing Hagrid-sized shoes isn’t suspicious at all.”

Tom had no idea who Hagrid was, but the look on Harry’s face was enough to make him smirk. Then it faded when he recalled the last part of Harry’s objection. “I would have thought that I’d insist that my greatest enemies would be mine alone to touch.”

Harry sighed. “Now that I think about it, that’s been the case all those other times. In the Triwizard Tournament, he refused to let anyone but himself play with his food. It’s a gamble, here, but I think the Death Eaters will throw me into the cells if they decide to pump you for information. If that happens, we’ll just have to give up our helpless prisoner routines, incapacitate whoever’s holding us, and hope we can get into the cells and out of here before You Know Who arrives.”

“If you start a fight, they’ll summon him.”

“I’m not going to let them torture you. If we’re quick enough, we can stop them from doing that. And if we’re not, then we’ll just have to act fast.”

Tom was about to protest and tell him that their goals were more important than comfort, but it occurred to him that he wouldn’t be much use as a shuddering wreck who could barely stand, let alone fight. Besides...the Death Eaters would summon the Voldemort once

they were finished having their fun anyway. "A lot of this is based on predictions and ideal scenarios."

"You mean that a lot of things could go wrong? Definitely. I guess we'll just have to prepare for the worst - if they discover the Elder Wand or do something else that makes our plan fall apart, we should cut our losses and start fighting."

"Agreed."

Harry unstrapped the holster and stuck it into his shoe after casting an Unbreakable Charm on the Wand to soothe his paranoia. The holster seemed to shiver before fading and Harry reluctantly put his foot back in the boot. Trying to get used to the feeling of the wand, he did straighten. "Hey, Tom?"

"Yes?"

"Do you want your wand hidden, too? You could grab the wand of the first Death Eater that apparates here after we say You Know Who's name."

Indecision crept over Tom's face. "As much as I would like that, we can't. In order for this to seem like a realistic capture, we have to downplay our abilities. You dispatching a Death Eater that quickly wouldn't help that, and the fact that I didn't have a wand in the first place would be noticeably odd."

Harry really didn't like the idea that he was the only one who was going to have any sort of magical defensive capabilities in this scheme of theirs. In fact, there were a lot of things about this that he didn't like. His wand in the hands of Death Eaters definitely made the top of the list, though letting himself get hit by a curse came in a close second.

"OK, wands out." Harry took a breath. "Voldemort."

They tensed, waiting for the inevitable, but didn't have to for long. Death Eaters apparated on the scene and Harry made a show of yelling, "Merlin, they found us! Expelliarmus!"

"Impedimenta!" Tom joined in, feeling ridiculous.

Restrict yourself to the seventh-year Hogwarts curriculum at best, Harry, he told himself as he 'narrowly' avoided being hit by some spell or another.

"Give up, Potter!" one of them crowed. "You're surrounded!"

Harry valiantly restrained a sarcastic response and shot off another lousy spell. Another Death Eater fired a bombarda at Harry's toes. Fighting all his instincts, Harry planted his feet down and let the spell blast him backwards. He forced himself not to break into one of the rolls he had learned in his time with Hadrian and landed flat on his back. An incarcerous finished him off, and Harry couldn't help but reflect on how embarrassing this all was.

Tom whirled around as if he was overwhelmed and had no idea of who to hit next. He knew that a Disarming spell was being thrown at his back and ordered himself not to move. It plowed him into the floor and he let his wand go flying. "Ugh..."

The Death Eaters chortled at their victory and he tried not to sneer. "So, Potter...and friend. It seems like you've run out of luck. Trying to scurry back to your precious Order?" Harry glared back defiantly, which only earned more guffawing. "And who's this you've dragged along, Potter?" He flicked his wand at Tom and the boy suddenly bowled over just when he was beginning to stand. "A filthy mudblood?"

Tom froze as he heard the word. Not even the staunchest anti-Hadrian supporters or blood supremacists used such a revolting, uncouth word out loud. It was considered classless...and a death sentence. Despite all the pureblood-mixed blood tensions, he'd heard only one person use it in public, calling Hadrian 'Lord Mudblood', and he'd been killed the next day.

“Pity we can’t teach you two scum your place,” the Death Eater continued. “The Dark Lord wants that pleasure for himself. We wouldn’t want to keep him waiting would we, now?” He Summoned Harry’s wand into his hand and took off the ropes. With a jerk of the Death Eater’s head, the others grabbed Harry and Tom’s arms.

A grimly victorious smile flashed on Tom’s lips before he wiped himself clean of visible emotion. Once again, he felt like he was being compressed into a tube before he reappeared on the lawn of Malfoy Manor.

The white peacocks didn’t even spare them a glance as they strutted about and he couldn’t help picturing Lucius’ father’s face if he’d seen their group trample on his immaculately trimmed grass.

A shove sent him stumbling forward. “Get moving, you two. Straight through the doors.” Scowling, Tom did as he was told. He consoled himself with the fact that the Death Eaters were being even less thorough than they anticipated; hiding another wand didn’t even seem necessary.

The enormous entrance to the Manor swung open as they approached and he stepped into the familiar surroundings. Portraits sneered down at them as the Death Eaters jostled them around. Tom held his head high and expression blank while Harry was clearly counting all the instances where he could have turned the tables on them, judging by his sourness.

Passing through the opulent hallways, they eventually reached a double door that led to the living room. The Death Eaters seemed to salivate as their leader opened it, revealing three inhabitants inside.

Tom’s heart stopped as he saw the woman in front of him. “You better have a good reason for interrupting, Rockwood!” His composure was cracking and almost fell completely but a sharp elbow in the ribs reminded him to keep up the pretences. “Bellatrix?” he whispered.

Thankfully, no one but Harry heard him. "Oh, but we do," 'Rockwood' replied with relish. He wrenched Harry in front of him and pushed him forward. "We've got Potter."

Lestrangle's crazy eyes light with delight. "Harry Potter..." she breathed and then began to cackle. Both boys stopped breathing, unwillingly comparing the laugh to the Bellatrix's they knew. "Poor wittle Potter...you'll be reunited with your ickle friends soon!"

"Where are they?" Harry snapped himself out of it and demanded.

"Mr. Potter," a second figure broke in and Tom jerked as he recognized him. Lucius seemed to glide by her side, scrutinizing Harry's face. "After all this time, you appear...how convenient." Harry prayed that the intonation he gave the word had nothing to do with suspicion and everything to do with well-disguised glee.

Ice clutched Tom's limbs as he watched them. That man...there was no doubt that he was his friend. No, he's not. He's Lucius counterpart. They might have the same nature, but their nurture has been entirely different. This Lucius has a coldness and indifference that your Lucius doesn't. And Bellatrix...

Merlin, he had no idea how to even begin to describe her.

"Oh look," Bellatrix's counterpart declared delightedly, "Potter's mudblood friend is going to cry."

Harry managed to stop himself from rolling his eyes. He didn't need to look back to know that wasn't the case. Clearly Tom, like anyone in his position, was taking his hard, but he wasn't going to break down, even if Bellatrix was his...well, his pseudo-girlfriend.

Lestrangle marched up to Tom and seized his jaw, forcing him to look at her. "Potter," she said, though her usual insanity was oddly reduced, "you seem to have yourself a fan." She flicked Tom's hair out of the way, revealing his lightning bolt scar.

“Yeah, well, being on the run is kind of boring,” Harry sniped, “so we decided to indulge in some cosplay.” His gaze lingered on Tom for a moment before he turned to the final person attending their reception party: Draco.

“Who is he?”

Bellatrix’s demand caused him to look back. “Who?”

“Don’t play dumb with me, Potter – who is he?”

Worry prickled Harry’s skin; her tone was too harsh. Surely she didn’t...recognize him? You never know, he dreaded. Voldemort could have looked a lot like Tom before he was resurrected. There’s no way she could have made the connection though. At worst, she’ll assume he’s some relative –

“No one you need to concern yourself with, madam,” Tom replied politely.

Bellatrix eyed him before breaking into her signature, off-her-rocker grin. “Oh, he’s a well mannered mudblood, is he?”

“Bellatrix,” Lucius interrupted, “we don’t have time for this. Draco, do you recognize Mr. Potter’s companion?”

The younger Malfoy started. “I...”

“Come now, Draco,” Lucius urged. “Tell us who this is. One of Potter’s allies, perhaps?”

Draco clenched the arms of his chair before shaking his head. “I don’t know who he is. I’ve never seen him before.”

Harry scanned the room, sensing that they weren’t going to be tortured, just mocked and generally condescended to for the next few minutes. Draco was by a softly burning fireplace; Harry knew he could Conjure something alcoholic and shoot it in there if he wanted to perform some mass destruction or a large-scale distraction. The

mantle could also be blasted; if he did it with a strong enough spell, it might hit Draco and knock him out. Would Harry be the master of the Elder Wand then?

The hands gripping his arm tightened and Harry drew his attention back in front of him. "No," Rockwood snarled, "I captured him! I get to summon the Dark Lord!"

A string of curses erupted through Harry's head as he heard that. They just going to have them wait here until Voldemort came? That would completely jeopardize their plan! They needed to be taken into the holding cells.

"Silence, Rockwood!"

"Listen here, Lestranger"

"This is my home," Lucius cut in, "I should-"

"I'm not letting you steal the credit for this!"

Harry met a bewildered Tom's eyes as the Death Eaters started arguing. When he looked at him, Harry raised an eyebrow in question.

Slowly, Tom nodded.

Instantly, Harry smashed the back of his fist into Rockwood's nose. "Arrgh!"

Just as the man started to release his wand and Harry in pain and surprise, Harry grabbed his arm, ducked under it, and twisted the appendage behind him.

Rockwood howled. Harry ripped his wand out of his hand and threw him forward. He barely registered the man plowing into Lucius before he delivered a spinning kick to the Death Eater beginning to lift up his wand.



Tom smashed his elbows into his captor's midsection, snatched his wand, and Stunned him. The Cruciatus Curse practically grazed his temple and Tom Summoned the elegant sofa behind Bell – Lestrangle and Malfoy at once.

The two of them hadn't recovered enough from the shock to completely avoid the flying furniture, and were knocked off balance.

"I'll take the front," Harry hissed as he locked on Malfoy, "you take the back!"

"As you wish," Tom returned, easily taking out the Death Eaters that they'd allowed to capture them one by one.

"P-Parseltongue!" Malfoy senior was in disbelief.

Harry jumped out of the way of a curse and flung a spell in reply. The parry was slightly clumsier than his normal ability, but still quick. Inwardly, Harry mourned the fact that the element of surprise was fading.

"Stupefy," Tom finished off the last resistance in the back, leaving them against three opponents, since Draco had started to throw in his own contribution.

Harry ran forward. Malfoy senior's eyes widened and he threw spell after spell, which Harry either avoided or blocked. The blonde backed away as realization dawned on him. "Campeador!"

In the blur of motion that followed, Malfoy didn't know how, but the fireplace hurled out flames; the force launched everyone to the floor.

Harry flipped and landed on his feet. He kicked Malfoy's wand out of his hand as he scrambled up and swung his wand around to Draco. "Expelliarmus!" Draco grasped futilely at the air as his wand soared overhead and into Harry's hand.

"Draco-!"

“Get over there!” Harry snapped. Malfoy stiffened, features immediately becoming perfectly schooled. Harry motioned with Draco’s wand to the opposite corner of the room as he kept the one he stole from Rockwood on him. “Move – now!” Slowly, Malfoy did as he was ordered and Harry watched until he was right where he wanted him before putting both Malfoys under the incarcerous spell. Their arms were pinned to their sides; there was no way they could summon Voldemort now.

“Crucio!”

Tom intercepted Lestrage's curse with the lamp on the nearby table. “Nox.”

“Lumos , avada-”

Harry joined in, Summoning all the artifacts from the walls and launching them at Lestrage. With her attention divided between two duelists and so many flying objects, she was forced to use a widespread Banishing Charm and then switch to a shield to defend against the maelstrom of spells Tom was sending her.

Harry was charging right behind the Banished furniture and while Lestrage was fast, she wasn’t a campeador – Harry knocked her hand away and Tom’s petrificus totalus ended the duel.

No one spoke for a moment as they noted the damage. Unconscious Death Eaters were strewn all over the place. Furniture was either missing or ruined, and the carpet scorched by the flames was burning. After a moment of deliberation, Tom levitated Lestrage to the side so that they could keep all three in sight while putting them far enough away that they couldn’t communicate.

Harry put out the fire with a swish of his wand. “How many more Death Eaters are here?”

Malfoy didn’t answer. Harry pointed his wand at Draco. “I’m in no mood to play around, Mr. Malfoy. I know you’re holding my friends

somewhere in this mansion of yours and I don't care who I have to hurt to get to them."

Tom's expression didn't change, but he couldn't help but wonder if that was an empty threat or a statement of fact. Hadrian had often gone to any lengths necessary for those he valued...

"Chose, Mr. Malfoy: your pride or your son? Even if you don't tell us, it's only a matter of time before we find out where they are. Make it easier on everyone and spill."

"You won't do it, Potter," Malfoy sneered. "You haven't the nerve."

"Do you really want to risk your son on that assumption?"

Lestrangle glared murderously from her position on the floor but could do nothing when he answered, "The cellar."

"Do you know where that is?" Harry asked Tom without lifting his eyes from Malfoy's.

"Yes. How many more Death Eaters or other individuals are in the Manor?"

"...Two."

"Elaborate."

Luc – Malfoy pierced him with a glare that would reduce a lesser person to a blubbing mess. "My wife, Narcissa." A faraway part of Tom's mind celebrated for his friend as he sent a subtle probe of legilimency. "And Pettigrew."

"He appears to be telling the truth," Tom publicized.

Harry growled, "Pettigrew."

"Grievances?"

“Oh, more than that. Much more.”

“We’ll have to remedy that if we see him,” Tom drawled. “For now, let’s Stun them, retrieve our rightful wands, and go. I don’t want to take any chances.”

“Right. Stupefy and stupefy.”

A/N: Argh! Why is it that no matter how many times I tell the words 'Chapter Eighteen' to center, it aligns to the left as soon as I press 'save'? I suppose is trying to foil my attempts at continuity...

But in other news, I think I'm starting to see a pattern with all these month-later updates :( Things are not getting helped with midterms littered all over the next few weeks. Would you believe I'm already having nightmares about calculus \*shudders\*? Anyway, thanks to everyone who reviewed and waited for this chapter - it's a definite highlight in my day :)

Rough Translation of Spells:

Adhaero – cleave

Propinquus – close

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter. And writing these disclaimers every chapter is really kind of pointless, since nothing would have changed since the first chapter...

Harry dashed past the numerous blonde, scornful, and overly wealthy portraits scoffing at them as they thundered down the hall. "Right or left?" he asked Tom. Malfoy Manor was nothing less than a labyrinth, and Harry was sure that if he didn't have Tom here, he'd be lost already.

"Right," Tom answered promptly, footsteps absorbed by the lush carpet beneath them. "The first door on the left after that should lead to the cellar."

Harry swiveled around the corner and grabbed the knob of said door, only to release it at once. "Ow!" He scowled down at his lightly steaming hands. "There's some sort of spell on it."

"...I can't believe after taking so many aspects of our plan into account, we overlooked this one."

"Alohomora." The door decided not to be polite and oblige him.

Tom informed, "I can try breaking the spell, but it will take time."

"Let me try something first. Stand back...reducto!"

The door shuddered but didn't break.

"I'll start ward breaking..."

"Wait. I've got another trick up my sleeve." Harry swished his wand and possibly the world's thickest pair of gloves materialized in front of him. He shoved his hands in them and wrapped them around the knob, which caused them to start to burn.

Alright, you know how this is supposed to work. Feel the energy moving through your veins. Direct the magic. Harry gritted his teeth

and pulled. His muscles fired up in response and the door began to tremble. Come on – force that campeador magic to –

“Ahhhh!”

The door flew off its hinges and Harry crashed into the opposite wall.

Tom’s eyes widened as Harry groaned and sank to the floor. “Are you alright?”

“Ugh...” was the articulate response. Tom started casting a few rudimentary diagnostic healing spells when Harry insisted, “I’m alright. Just a bit winded. And rattled.” He massaged the back of his head before standing.

“You solved our problem,” Tom offered, eyeballing the door splayed over the floor. He peered into the dimly lit stairwell exposed by Harry’s manhandling.

Harry tried to ignore the white spots slowly blinking in and out of his vision and hurried to the top of it. He couldn’t hear anyone down there, but...“Homenum revelio.” The spell detected six people. They must be holding their breaths?

“Lumos.” The tip of Tom’s wand lit, casting eerie gold into the cellar. The six people huddled and tied together flinched away from the light before squinting up at them.

Harry tore down the stairs. “Ron! Hermione!”

“H-Harry?” Hermione gasped.

Harry started to grin but immediately stopped. “What are these?” Dark welts dotted her face.

“Don’t come near her!” Ron shouted. Harry jerked back. “You’re not Harry! You’re some Death Eater trick-”

“I’m not a trick, Ron,” Harry cut him off. “It’s me.”

He snorted. "Oh yeah? Where are your glasses?"

"It's a long story, but I don't need them anymore."

"That's the stupidest cover up I've ever heard," Ron sneered.

"It's not a cover up!"

Tom reached the bottom of the stairs. "Harry can prove his claims." He stared at the two Weasleys...well, the one Weasley and future Weasley...before his gaze settled on the other occupants. The first looked like the younger version of Hadrian's chief spellcreator, Luna Lovegood. The second was a dark-skinned boy he couldn't place.

A goblin? He frowned when he noted the other and then raised his eyebrows when he saw the final person: Ollivander. "What on earth is he doing here?" No response. Well, the man was unconscious, so he wasn't exactly insulted. "Ah, yes. It must be about the Elder Wand..."

"I told you it's a trick!" Ron trumpeted. "Harry doesn't know about the Elder Wand!"

Running a hand through his hair in frustration, Harry instructed, "Ask me something. Anything. I can answer it."

Hermione coughed before rasping, "What's your patronus?"

"A stag."

"Your boggart?"

Tom looked at him curiously, but Harry's back was turned, so he didn't notice. "A dementor."

Weasley's brow furrowed. "OK, then, how did we get into the Slytherin common room and what year did we do it?"

"You broke into our common room?" Tom interrupted sharply.

“We had good reason to – we suspected Draco Malfoy was the Heir of Slytherin.”

“Malfoy? I’ve been meaning to ask, is he Lucius’..?”

“Yes. Don’t think about it. You’ll stay sane that way.”

“Hey, Death Eaters?” Ron butted in.

They looked at him with varying degrees of annoyance. “We’re not Death Eaters! It was second year and we used Polyjuice.”

Hermione and Ron exchanged looks. “That bag in the corner,” Hermione began carefully, “open it.”

Harry moved towards it but Tom stopped him. “What?”

“If they think we’re the enemy, that bag won’t have anything good in it.”

“We just want you to take out a snitch,” Hermione explained. “And...put it in your mouth.”

“Excuse me?” Tom crossed his arms. “That’s preposterous.”

“We have our reasons,” Ron jutted his chin out. “Go on. Put it in.”

Giving them a weird look, Harry Summoned the snitch and started to do as he was told. Just as it touched his mouth, however, the snitch seemed to shift. Harry looked down at it. Words had appeared. “‘I open at the close’?” he read out loud. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It is you!” Hermione exclaimed. “Harry, you’re really here!”



“Of course I am – though I have no idea what a graffitied snitch does to prove that.” He grinned and Banished their bindings. Ron and Hermione leaped to their feet and Hermione threw herself at Harry.

“I can’t believe it! After all this time -”

Harry laughed. “I’m not that easy to get rid of!”

“We thought...we thought you were...”

“Sorry to disappoint, but I’m still firmly entrenched in the land of the living and plan to stay that way.”

“Glad to hear that, mate,” Ron thumped him on the back.

“Hermione,” Harry wheezed, “I can’t breathe...!”

Disconcerted to see the Weasleys of all people hugging Harry, or showing any sort of emotion other than killing-rage, for that matter, Tom distracted himself by freeing the other prisoners. He scanned Ollivander, noting that he was in the worst condition, physically and mentally. If he hadn’t wakened despite all the noise they were making, it might be better to leave him that way. The body used unconsciousness to heal...

This is likely the result of torture. He suspected that his other self was demanding information about where the Wand was, but Ollivander either didn’t know or didn’t want to answer.

“Here,” the suspected Luna Lovegood whispered. “He won’t be waking up soon. I’ll Levitate him out.” Tom shook off the uncanny feeling that talking civilly with younger clones of Hadrian’s followers was giving him and nodded.

“But...where have you been all this time?”

“It’s a long story,” Harry smiled. Suddenly, he grimaced. “Oh...no.”

“What?” three voices asked in alarm.

Harry gritted his teeth and seemed to look straight through them.

“He’s having a vision,” Tom warned. This can’t be good.

“You mean he’s seeing You Know Who?” the dark boy asked a little fearfully.

Nodding, Tom watched as Hermione squeezed Harry’s arm in support and Ron clasped his shoulder.

Harry let out the breath he’d been holding. “We…” he gasped, “have a problem.”

“The Death Eaters know you’re here?”

“Oh, they already know that,” Tom informed them and was slightly satisfied by the alarm on their features. “That isn’t the problem. Unless more that don’t know are coming?”

Reading between the lines, Hermione asked, sounding both impressed and surprised, “You overpowered them?”

“Yes. But we’ll talk about that later.” He shot a look at Tom. “You Know Who is coming.” Blood drained from everyone’s faces as they processed what that meant.

“Merlin’s-!” Ron started listing all sorts of parts of the fabled wizard’s anatomy.

Hermione blurted a second later, “We can’t get out of here unless someone keyed into the wards lets us out!”

“Are you serious? How do you know?”

“Lestrage was nice enough to inform us. You Know Who has transformed this place into a fortress. Unless we have Dark Marks, we aren’t getting out.”

Harry exchanged glances with Tom before hesitantly beginning, "Actually, I don't know if we want to get out of here just yet."

"What? You Know bloody Who is coming!"

"I know, Ron, but To...er, Thomas and I have a very important plan that involves You Know Who being nearby."

Tom didn't see much point in being given an alias, given that 'Tom' was a rather common name, but didn't comment. Instead, he pointed out, "We can only proceed if you are the master of all the Hallows. Right now, you only have two."

Harry held up the snitch. "I'm betting that the third is in here."

"Hallows?" Hermione frowned before scolding, "Are you honestly tracking those down? Harry, I would have thought you would have had more sense than that!"

"Wait, what do you mean you already have two?"

"Not now, Hermione, Ron – we need to figure a way out to get this thing to open like it says it will. At the close. Where ever that is."

"Wait, we're actually going to wait here for You Know Who to show up instead of finding a way out of here?" The redhead was incredulous.

"What do you suggest we do? Kidnap a Death Eater?"

"Yeah, why not? We're pretty much cows in a slaughterhouse right now. If we've got a You Know Who based plan, let's think of it once we're somewhere safe."

Hermione beamed. "That's quite well thought out, Ron." Ron just rolled his eyes but smiled anyway.

"What do you think?" Tom asked Harry.

“Honestly? I’m thinking this is our best shot. Maybe it’s just because we didn’t think about this a lot, but I can’t image another time where we’d corner You Know...Voldemort with only a small number of Death Eaters. Any other time we’ll have to fight, what? Twenty?”

“You want us to do this now.”

“I think it’s our best shot.”

Tom fought down his instincts, which were pushing him towards Weasley’s option, and tried to rationalize this. He didn’t trust plans thought of on-the-spot; he liked plenty of time to analyze them. But there was no time for that. Hoping he didn’t overlook something, he replied, “Logically...I think you’re right.”

“So..?”

“I don’t know exactly what’s going on here,” Hermione said, “but if this whole plan is hinges on whether Harry can figure out a way to open the snitch or not in less than a minute...”

If we leave right now, we can reach a Death Eater in time and use him to get us out. Just barely, but we could do it. Harry exhaled deeply. Everyone looked at him, waiting. If I say ‘no’, we’ll probably lose our only chance. But if I say ‘yes’ and Voldemort captures us, it will be all my fault. “We stay.”

“Alright,” Hermione whispered and Ron squeezed her hand. Dean and Tom nodded and Luna smiled as she whispered encouragement to the stilll unconscious Olivander. It was clear they were terrified and Harry had to admit that he was, too.

“OK.” He gripped the snitch and held it in front of him. “Open, open...” He popped it in his mouth. Nothing. He yanked it out. “Alright, that’s not the right way. I think the mouth trick has been all but used up.”

“We need to focus on what the close is,” Hermione quickly reasoned. “The close...is it a literal place or is it a metaphor?”

“There are thousands of places that can close,” Dean inputted. “Thousands.”

“So it has to be metaphorical?”

“ I don’t know! It could still be literal. Did Dumbledore ever specifically mention any places that close? This Hallows thing – maybe he knew where you would find the last Hallow. Maybe that place has a close.”

“If that's true..." Hermione paled. "Harry, I don't know why you think you have the Hallows, but if you really believe that, do you remember where you got them?"

Harry nodded. “My invisibility cloak is one and Dumbledore owned the Elder Wand.”

“What?”

“And we know the third Hallow is the Gaunt Ring.”

“How can you be certain?”

“Trust me. We know,” was Harry’s only response. “The places we found those were in a shack, a tomb, and Dumbledore gave me the Cloak. It couldn’t mean any of those.”

“It has to be metaphorical, then,” Hermione nodded. “He wouldn’t make it that ambiguous.”

“Metaphorical closes...” Harry murmured, pacing back and forth furiously. “Metaphorical closes...” His scar flared. “Ahh!”

“He – he’s here?” Ron asked.

“Almost. We have to hurry.”

“We’re not going to figure this out in time!”

“We have to-”

“Let’s grab a Death Eater just in case,” Tom’s suggestion cut him off.  
“We’ll try and figure out what this means on the way.”

“But how do you know we’ll make it in time? The first place You Know Who will probably go is where his Death Eaters are – we’d be running straight to him!”

“We don’t – but we have to try.”

Harry tore off his boot, cancelled the Disillusionment Charm on the Elder Wand, and tossed the snitch to Tom so that he could wield the wand in his left hand. “Alright, I second that motion. Let’s go!”

They all streamed out of the cellar and immediately Harry’s scar began to throb. Voldemort was coming, and he was coming quickly. If anyone ever needed a definition of Not Good, this would qualify.

A portrait overhead gasped in outrage as the prisoners, looking like they’d seen better days, emerged. “They’re escaping!”

Harry and Tom tried not to wince. Of course the portraits would report a breakout! But how could they stop-?

Smash! The wall below the portrait exploded and the commotion died. “Talk about our whereabouts,” Tom warned between breathes, “and you forfeit your existence.”

Harry doubted this would be much help; as soon as they were out of range, the portraits would give away their position. Still, if the portraits around them didn’t talk until later, it would delay discovery.

“Arrgh!” He clapped a hand to his forehead.

“He’s here?”

“Almost – Tom, we have to abort! We’re not going to get there in time.”

The Slytherin hesitated before saying, “Run on ahead, then. See if you can get one of them-”

Without another word, Harry sped off, only partially aware of the gasps from his other friends. Unfortunately, once he turned the next two corners, he realized that he wasn’t completely sure which way was which. “I don’t have time for this!” he snapped to no one in particular, heart stampeding against his chest. Voldemort would be here at any second – he couldn’t stand here trying to get directions!

In a burst of inspiration, Harry incanted, “Homenum revelio.” The spell perused the premises in an invisible pulse before returning. Harry didn’t have much experience with the spell, but he was sure it was telling him that three people were to his right. Hoping that was true, Harry took the next turn that would draw him in that direction.

His scar was beginning to stab him with bolts of pain. He staggered for a moment before throwing open the doors in front of him and practically laughed in relief when he saw Draco, Malfoy, and LeStrange still unconscious in the corners of the room.

He’s coming – act quickly!

Harry sprinted forward and grabbed the nearest person, who happened to be Draco. Ignoring his instincts, which were telling him to just go, he cast a motor locus and started to turn.

“Merlin!” Pain blinded him for a moment, and Harry stumbled. He shook himself and took a step forward when the door in front of him sealed shut.

Harry froze.

The door just shut on me. Why would it do that? Surely it's not...no one...

The faint sounds of harsh breathing came from behind him.

Over the torrent of extremely rude words clamoring to summarize the situation, Harry prepared himself to jump to the side. Turned or not, there was no way the person boring holes into his back was going to mistake him for just another Death Eater. Especially when two of them were arranged all over the floor and the third was being Levitated out.

The silence stretched. Then, "Aren't you going to face me, Harry?"

The quietly menacing voice was like a spell itself. Harry forced his muscles to start working again and slowly rotated. His hands clenched on his two wands. "Voldemort."

"What are you doing in my manor, Harry?" He asked it conversationally, as if the appearance of the boy prophesized to be able to kill him standing in his fortress after defeating his top lieutenants wasn't irritating in the least. "Surely you realize this isn't an intelligent move on your part?"

"What can I say?" Harry summoned up some audacity while taking a subtle step back. "I wanted to see some familiar faces. It's rather lonely on the run." He trained his eyes on Voldemort and didn't move when the Dark Lord waved a skeletal hand and Lestrangle and Malfoy began stirring. He started to take another step back –

"Leaving so soon? It isn't polite to depart without saying goodbye."

"Sorry, but I think I've overstayed my welcome. Wouldn't want to impose."

"Do stay," his crimson eyes narrowed. "Lord Voldemort extends this invitation to you, Harry. Do not be so ungrateful and refuse me..."



“Master!” Lestrangle gasped once she was standing again. “Potter! Potter is a-”

“Silence, Bella.”

Malfoy’s eyes landed on his son’s prone form and he stiffened. He wasn’t going to risk Voldemort’s anger by asking the Dark Lord to be mindful of Draco’s safety, but Harry knew he wouldn’t have to worry about fighting him once the spells started flying.

He heard footsteps and gritted his teeth. Hermione, Tom, Ron, and everyone else were going to crash right into this party and then all Hell would break loose. He had to do something to alert them to who was standing behind the door.

…Now or never?

Without warning, Harry dove to the side and blasted the ceiling above the Dark Lord. His sudden movement triggered three curses but they all sailed past him and exploded in the spot he’d just been.

Harry wasted no time and leaped to his feet; Voldemort Banished the ceiling debris and falling furniture about to crush him and his followers with one smooth, effortless flick of his wand. “Avada Kedavra!”

Harry Summoned a sofa and hurled it in the spell’s path – it exploded in a sickening, eerie green smoke. “Avis oppugno!” A flock of birds bloomed into existence and propelled themselves at Harry’s enemies. He tried to ignore the squawks as several became victims of an array of Dark curses and shouted at the door, “Bombarda!”

The door didn’t budge. Bollocks! He dropped and rolled to avoid the next display of spells, struggling to keep both himself and Draco from meeting messy and painful ends.

“Avada Kedavra!”

“Crucio!”

Harry dodged and transfigured Draco into a Chocolate Frog Card, which he stuffed into his pocket. He had enough time to see the outrage flash across Malfoy's face before he flung back his own spells.

"You have improved," Voldemort observed dispassionately, parrying one of Harry's more powerful spells without any visible effort.

"You haven't!" Harry retorted in frustration. I have to get out of this room! He automatically shot off a reducto at the floor and then knew what he had to do next. Praying there wasn't something like a pile of stakes in the room below, Harry spun in one rapid motion, pointing his wand to the side. Deprimo!

The circle he'd carved into the floor creaked. Harry held his breath and threw up a shield to block the next set of spells as the ground beneath him gave way.

"Aahh!" he yelled. He vanished from the room and plummeted. Merlin - I'm tipping off! Harry scrambled to maintain his balance on his makeshift elevator. "Wingard - ow!" He slammed into the floor feet-first. For a second he just stared in amazement. His legs gave half-heartbarely noticable protests, but that was it. If he hadn't been a campeador, he was certain he would have broken several bones, if not all of them.

Green light launched itself at him from above, reminding him that now wasn't the best time to thank Lady Luck. Harry hurdled out of the way, bringing his wands up. A brief scan of the room revealed that he was in some storage place. Door, door, where is the door? His eyes darted around the room before spotting one ahead. Yes!

A small burst of noise alerted him that someone was apparating.

Voldemort!

Snapping back into motion, Harry tore towards the door, bellowing, "Lumos maximus!" White light blasted out of his wand, temporarily

blinding anyone behind him. Harry tossed a Disillusionment Charm over himself and flung open the door in his way.

Boom!

Everyone stopped walking.

“...Did you hear that?”

The Manor trembled and portraits wailed. “It’s Voldemort!” Hermione gasped. “He came too early! And Harry – Harry’s gone off to get the Death Eaters-!”

“Bloody Hell! They’re in the same room!”

Blood drained from Tom’s face. Harry was facing his counterpart?

The Gryffindors ran forward.

“Wait! We can’t just charge in-”

“Of course we can!” Weasley roared. “Harry needs our help!”

Hermione hesitated for a split second before following. Tom’s fist clenched over the snitch. Breaking to a room full of Death Eaters and a bloodthirsty Dark lord was not on this list of brilliant ideas. This is what happens when you’re tossed into a group of Gryffindors! Logic has no place here!

“Then break into pairs!” he instructed as he rushed after them. If they were going to take the kamikaze route, they may as well do it right. “Weasley, Hermione – you’re responsible for each other and no one else. You two,” he ordered Dean and Luna, “protect each other.” He pointed his wand at Ollivander and the goblin. “I apologize in advance for this.” Dean let out a yelp as the half-alive Ollivander and the goblin were transfigured into rings and Summoned to Tom’s hand. He slipped them on and continued to run after the other versions of Hadrian’s top Inner Circle members.

Feet pounding against the carpet, Tom directed them to turn the next corner. Weasley hurled a reducto at the closed doors, causing them to go flying across the room.

It was completely empty. "Where the Hell are they?" Weasley demanded, flinging his wand in every conceivable direction as if he expected Death Eaters to materialize from the shadows at a moment's notice.

"Down," Tom answered curtly at the exact time Hermione exclaimed, "Through that hole!" Tom cursed, knowing that while the Death Eaters had the advantage of being able to apparate, the rest of them would have to find more creative ways. "Homenum revelio." No one was down there. "I'll Levitate you – Weasley first." Squashing down the temptation to just dump him on the ground as soon as he had him under the spell, Tom cast the Levitation Charm and he drifted to the lower level.

Impatiently, Weasley tapped his foot as he waited. Hermione landed next to him. "We'll go on ahead-"

"No!" Tom narrowed his eyes at him. "If you do that, you'll be easy prey! Harry is resourceful and skilled enough to endure a few more seconds without us."

"But-"

"Do you want to help Harry or impede him?"

Ron flushed. "Of course I want to help him!"

"Then help him by waiting."

Glaring, Ron gave a sharp nod. Hermione pointed her wand at Tom and he forced himself to let her cast a spell on him and bring him to the floor below.

"Now?" was Weasley's terse demand.

“Now.”

“Merlin and Morgana!”

Harry darted out of the way of an overly friendly sword aiming to shish kebab him. Defodio! The chandelier hanging just above Voldemort broke – and was immediately Banished at Harry.

He dove for the floor, thanking all his luck that he still had his Disillusionment on. Not that it does much good, his inner critic shot back snidely. I’ve never seen so many homenum revelio spells cast in one duel!

Jumping up, he flung himself to the side to avoid an unidentified curse. Try Notice Me Not Charms! At once, he wove the spell around him and was rewarded when Voldemort’s spells suddenly stopped firing at him. Yes!

But a second later, he heard a disdainful hiss. “Very clever, Harry.” Not daring to look back, Harry realized that Voldemort must have found it odd that he was suddenly unable to sense his target – and had hit on what had happened.

The howl of livid flames caused his heart to stop. Harry ventured a glance over his shoulder and his verbal reaction was drowned out by the shrieks and snarls of the demonic fire-created beasts tearing after him.

His mouth dropped open. “Fiendfyre!”

A gigantic serpent reared, everything in its path either devoured by flames or exploding into soot. It opened its mouth –

Harry’s engorgio at the tapestry in front of him was completely drowned out. It swelled in size and Harry directed it behind him, transfiguring it into stone as it nearest the fiendfyre. If he could get make it large enough to cover the entire hall way –

The flames exploded against Harry's unconventional shield and he dug his feet into the ground, forced to stop running so he could concentrate all his efforts into defending. He was not going to let his last defense against fiendfyre blow back and smack him in the face!

Sweat began to bead his forehead. Tentacles of fire sputtered out from the sides of his shield, making wild attempts to snatch him before dissipating into the scalding air.

It was then that he noticed how much easier the magic seemed to come. He glanced down at the wand he was using, noticing that it wasn't his Holly one. Well, if the Elder Wand is the best channeler of magic out there...

With his own wand, he doubted he'd be able to blast Voldemort's spell back. Could he do it with this one?

Summoning his magic and pouring it through the Elder Wand, Harry willed the stone tapestry to fly forward. Undiluted power flowed through him. The force ramming against his shield seemed to lessen and Harry sincerely hoped that wasn't just his imagination. No, he entertained some cynicism. That's probably just Voldemort checking to see whether he's barbecued me yet or if he has to turn up the heat.

Suddenly, the fiendfyre evaporated. Harry's arms slacked before he ordered the stone tapestry forward. He wasn't at all surprised when it vanished midway and he was eye-to-eye to Voldemort again.

The Dark Lord examined the space he knew Harry was in for several silent moments. Harry stared right back. He somehow knew that if he ran now, their duel would start all over again, and he was perfectly alright with the idea of stalling until any bright ideas came.

Too bad they don't make appearances by popular demand, he scowled and took off the Disillusionment and Notice Me Note charms, wanting to conserve his magic.

Just when Harry started to debate whether to chuck a spell or not, his impromptu rescue team entered the hall they were all in. Malfoy and

Lestrangle whirled around, though Voldemort hadn't moved at all, obviously unconcerned.

Harry's heart leaped and he wasn't sure whether it was from gratefulness or worry. "Luna, Dean," Tom instructed quietly, "you take Malfoy. Weasley, Hermione...you take Lestrangle."

Hermione frowned and whispered, "I don't doubt you're a good duelist if you and Harry could get in here, but we have more experience fighting Voldemort."

Tom smiled grimly. "Believe me – you don't." His counterpart hadn't yet turned around but Tom already felt his breath leaving his chest. Or at least, he thought that was his other self. The creature standing between him and Harry was almost unrecognizable as human. With the pale skin and gaunt limbs, Tom was just as sure he was in the presence of the first successful necromancy subject.

"You've been surrounded," Tom raised his voice so that everyone could hear and mentally congratulated himself on the cool, controlled tone he'd managed.

Lestrangle sneered. "Going to demand we surrender, mudblood?"

"Oh, no. That would imply that we've accomplished something other than a standstill. I propose you let us leave safely and we'll refrain from harming any of you."

"This is no standstill, boy," his other self responded coldly. All air deserted Tom's lungs when it - he – turned. Immediately, distilled rage and shock erupted in his hellish eyes. "You!"

Tom didn't answer and sensed shifting behind him.

"Impossible," Voldemort snarled, suddenly lifting his wand off of Harry and pointing it at Tom.

Well that's a...weird decision. Harry wondered what thoughts were running through Voldemort's head. He knew the Dark Lord hated his

past and all reminders of it, but if he was thinking about anything along the lines of time travel...well, offering Tom wouldn't exactly help him much.

Well this has certainly made my day so much better, Tom indulged in some kept his eyes locked ahead of him as he considered the door to Harry's left, where he knew a staircase was. He could hint to Harry to take it, but would that help at all? When Harry left, everything would hinge on Tom's ability to distract his counterpart until Harry came up behind them, thereby uniting their forces.

In the meanwhile, they'd have to pray that no one would look behind them as Harry navigated the manor.

I don't like gambling. Slowly, he took out the snitch from his robes, which earned three distinct and insulting sneers from his audience. But which gamble do I want to take? That they won't look behind them or that I can figure out the only way to get us all out of here alive in the span of a single conversation?

"Well?"

The softness in which it was said told Tom it was time to start talking or heads would start rolling. He mentally slapped himself as he responded, "Nothing is impossible with magic."

Did you actually say that?

No doubt his other self would interpret this as some patronizing taunt. "Needless to say, after an eventful and uncomfortable series of events," he invented to compensate, try to sound somewhat cryptic, "here I am." He knew the cryptic always attracted his attention.

Voldemort scanned him, a sneer curling his lipless mouth. "Explain," he hissed in Parseltongue.

'Open at the close' – what does that mean? "Well, you see, that has a rather interesting answer." He heard Hermione gasp and hoped no



one else realized that Tom's response indicated that he was a parselmouth.

Did the headmaster ever use that in a phrase?

"I suppose you could say we made travel plans that resulted in a rather exotic location."

"Crucio."

Tom barely intercepted the spell with a Summoned portrait.

"I tire of your games, boy." Tom didn't answer. "What?" Voldemort mocked. "Don't you have a witty response to that?"

What is the close? "Oh, I have witty responses in abundance. I'm just saving them for opportune moments."

From behind him, Weasley demanded as quietly as possible, "What the Hell are you doing?"

"Stalling," Tom growled.

"You're baiting You Know Who!"

Harry raised his eyebrows across the hall as if to say: "Congratulations, Tom. You're so singularly infuriating that he completely forgot about my existence".

Meanwhile, Tom was struggling to remember why he ever thought Hadrian didn't have patience.

"Stop talking to him!" Weasley finished.

"I will give you an ultimatum," Voldemort whispered. Tom stiffened as he was informed, "I will release Potter's pitiful band of cohorts in exchange for you."

“...Harry and Ollivander?” Tom forced himself to ask. Sweat trickled down his back. I’m running out of inane topics to cover!

“They are nonnegotiable.”

“How about I...throw in...my cooperation?” The close-?

Voldemort gave a cruel chuckle. “Your desperation is as amusing as it is disgustingly misrepresentative.”

Tom fished for something to say and came up with the lousy, “This isn’t desperation. It’s haggling.”

Voldemort’s eyes became slits. “Enough. Give me your answer.” Tom answered by not answering. “So be it.” He raised his wand into offensive position and Bel – Lestrangle and Malfoy, through some unknown communication, assigned themselves who they were going to fight.

The Dark Lord elegantly turned to face the boy watching him down the hall. “Prepare yourself, Harry. The curtains are about to close on your little rebellion.”

Tom froze. ‘The curtains close’. Close.

A fake smile missing its usual seemingly genuine quality cracked across Tom’s lips as he paled. He brought the snitch in front of him. “If we are about to die-” the snitch stirred and he choked on the words. A gleaming signet ring lay in his palm. “We,” he stammered out, “we...”

The Gaunt Ring was in his hand, appearing after he had said...but that meant...

“Harry!” He wordlessly cast a Switching spell and one of Harry’s shoes suddenly found itself in his grasp.

What the-? Harry realized what had happened and sprung into action, Summoning the Gaunt Ring to his hand. Slipping it on, Harry realized

that he was wearing the Cloak, wielding the Wand, and now he had the Ring.

Now what?

The spells started flying. “Avada Kedavra!”

“Crucio!”

“Sectum-”

“Expelliarmus!”

“Stupefy!”

Harry dove out of the way. The Deathly Hallows didn’t exactly come with a user’s manual, but should he even activate them with Voldemort and his best Death Eaters in range? He’d risk taking everyone. “Conjunctivitis!” he shouted and whirled out of the way of an entirely too familiar green light.

You don’t have much choice, Potter. We’re good, but not good enough. His jaw setting, Harry tried to focus on the magic humming from the three Hallows. If using them was like any other magical object, all it would take was the desire to make them work.

A billow of magical energy cut past him. Harry bit down a yell of surprise and Disillusioned himself again. It wasn’t going to help much, but it was something.

Come on, he urged. Work!

“Sectumsemptra!” Tom directed at Voldemort, who immediately turned and deflected the spell. Tom’s eyes widened as sapphire flames began hurling at him. “Get behind me!” he ordered to his nearby allies. He let out a stream of Latin and a cerulean shield leaped in front of him.

Shockwaves blasted through the floor. Tom could feel magical energy blowing back and forth from the impact of the two spells, when a tremor wrecked the manor.

At first he thought someone had hit the ceiling or one of the walls, but then he realized that the quakes seemed to come from within the air itself.

His attention jumped to where he imagined Harry would be. A pale gold light was wreathing around the Gryffindor and Tom felt a tug on the magic around them.

“What is this?” Malfoy demanded, eyes darting between Harry and the pair of students he’d been dueling with.

“It’s working,” Tom whispered. All of a sudden, light burst forward. Several people shouted in surprise as the uncomfortable feeling of inter-dimensional travelling ripped their senses from them.

It worked, Harry breathed as his sight returned. And even better, he couldn’t feel any anti-apparation wards any more. Malfoy Manor was gone - they were standing in its charred remains on the lawn. Not wasting a second, he took advantage of everyone else’s disorientation to sprint past Voldemort and free himself from the Disillusionment Charm. He seized Ron and Hermione’s arms. “Back to the blood wards!”

Tom grabbed Luna and Dean. He’d never tried to side-long apparate more than one person with at a time, but in theory, it should be the same. Calling up the image of Riddle Manor, they vanished from the hall.

The pressure of being stuffed into a particularly thin tube left and Harry reappeared in the bottom of the grand staircase. Hermione stumbled and Ron gave a low moan, still feeling the aftereffects of dimension hopping. “Are you two alright?”

Ron dizzily whirled around, hurling his wand in front of him. "I don't feel so good...." He noticed their new surroundings. "Hang on a minute..."

"Where are we?" Hermione voiced his question. She stared at Riddle Manor's awe-inspiring grand staircase before sliding her gaze to the opulent floor. "Harry..?"

"We're safe," he answered. "Volde-"

"Don't say his name!" they shouted in unison. "He has a-"

"Taboo. I know. It won't work here."

"What do you mean 'it won't work here'? You Know Who has it all over Britain!" Ron exclaimed.

"And for that matter, how did we get out of Malfoy Manor? No one can leave without a Dark Mark."

Harry slid his wand back into its holster and stuffed the Elder Wand into his pocket. "Trust me, okay? I'll explain everything soon."

"Harry, we do trust you. But you have to admit, you vanishing for months only to reappear and break into Malfoy Manor is a bit...well, we need answers."

"And you'll get them," a voice called from the top of the stairs. The trio looked up to see Tom, Dean, and Luna above. Rather sulkily, Tom remarked, "It figures that the first part of this place you'd remember is the staircase."

"You mean staircases," Harry gestured at the two.

"Don't emphasize it..."

Harry started forward, asking, "Where did you put Ollivander and Griphook?"

“Assuming that was the goblin’s name, I transfigured them back to their regular forms and left them in the guest rooms.” He gave Ron an uneasy look. “Are you feeling..?”

“Where’s the nearest bathroom?” Ron queasily stumbled up the stairs. Tom rapidly pointed him to the left and the redhead bounded up and vanished through the door that had been indicated.

Harry gave a half-hearted chuckle. “Who knew? Seasick, carsick, airsick, and now...” Tom forced a weak smile at the joke and Harry fished in his pockets, pulling out Malfoy the Chocolate Frog Card.

“What’s that?” Dean pointed at it.

“...Malfoy.”

Hermione gaped. “You...you took him here? With us?”

“I didn’t exactly have time to think about dropping the card when I was apparating, Hermione.” Harry looked down at the card. “Now I guess he’s stuck with us.”

Ron emerged from the bathroom. “Who’s stuck with us?”

“Malfoy.”

Suddenly, his face contorted. “That prick was going to kill Dumbledore!” He whipped out his wand again. “Let’s-”

“No, Ron,” Hermione jumped in front of Harry and the card he was holding. “We can’t.”

“Why not? We can put that Death Eater to practical use – get him to own up for what he did by telling us what Voldemort is doing.”

Harry sighed. “I feel kind of sorry for him, actually. He didn’t seem like he wanted to get Tom or I killed when his father ordered him to

identify us. And on the Tower, I could see he wasn't going to kill Dumbledore."

Nodding, Hermione added, "He might have been an arrogant toerag, but now that he'd been forced to stop talking the talk and start walking the walk, he's harmless."

"I wouldn't call him harmless."

"Well, we can't just leave him as a Chocolate Frog Card forever, can we Ron?" she placed her hands on her hips.

"He's too dangerous." This time it was Dean who spoke up. "Even if we take away his wand, we shouldn't take the chance that he could contact daddy dearest some other way."

Tom tried not to laugh at the image of 'daddy dearest' being applied to Lucius, of all people. Pushing that thought away, he said, "We won't have to worry about that. Draco won't be able to contact...Mr. Malfoy." He and Harry exchanged looks and Harry slowly nodded. "We better sit down."

"Why?" Ron asked.

"What we're about to say...what I'm about to say...is going to sound very...far-fetched," Harry began as Tom started through an archway that led, to his incredulity, to a second living room. He eyed the luxurious sofas reluctantly, knowing that as soon as everyone sat, he'd have to start talking.

Hermione settled herself in the seat next to Ron, and Dean and Luna claimed the one next to them. They waited expectantly but Harry just shifted uncomfortably. All of a sudden, Ron realized, "Wait, we never introduced ourselves."

Hermione clapped her hand over her mouth. "Oh my goodness, you're right! How rude of us." She stood and offered Tom her hand, who tried not to stare as he accepted it. "Pleased to meet you. My name is Hermione Granger."

“Ron Weasley,” Ron introduced himself. “Nice dueling technique, by the way, Thomas...?”

Tom looked at Harry. Harry looked at Tom. “Uh, guys, this is...” He paused. “Er...well, he’s...”

“Don’t tell me you forgot his name!” Ron joked. Hermione, on the other hand, frowned, noticing the torn expression on her friend’s face.

“Um...”

Tom sighed and shot him a look that clearly said: Just get it over with. “It’s like ripping off a bandage, Harry,” he offered almost innocently.

Thanks to the months he’d spent around him, Harry noticed the smirk. “You’re enjoying this, aren’t you, you smug git?”

“Harry..?” Hermione tentatively questioned.

“Must I introduce myself?”

“No!”

“If you don’t-”

“Keep your shirt on,” Harry scowled at him. “I’m doing it. Look, everyone, this is-” he inhaled, “-this is Tom Marvolo Riddle.”

Absolute silence.

One...

Two...

“What?!”

Harry winced. Enhanced hearing had its negatives. “I know what the one we knew did in the past, but he’s not the same-”



"This isn't funny," Ron narrowed his eyes. "Don't joke about him."

"It's not meant to be."

"That's not possible and even if it was, you know what he did! Are you seriously going to introduce him to me as if he doesn't deserve to be in Azkaban?"

"Ron. I am not joking. This really is Tom Marvolo Riddle."

"What's the big deal?" Dean wondered. "What did he do?"

"Oh, nothing," Ron growled dangerously, rising to his feet. "He only almost murdered my sister!"

"I...what?" Tom whispered faintly.

"Ron..." Harry started, but it seemed that the boy finally believed him, because he leaped forward.

"That's right, you filthy monster!" Ron roared and Harry immediately restrained him from lunging at Tom. "You almost killed my sister! My sister, when she was just eleven years old-"

"Ron!"

"You brought her into your bloody Chamber of bloody Secrets and-"

"Ron!"

"-you sent a basilisk on-"

"Ronald Bilius Weasley!" This time it was Hermione who screamed the name. Everyone immediately stopped talking. Breathing hard, she turned to face Harry, her eyes wide and searching. After a moment she instructed, "Tell us what's happening, Harry."

Tom suggested tentatively, "Perhaps we should sit back down?"

“I’m not sitting in the same room as the likes of you,” Ron snarled at him.

“Ron, stop. All of you. Wands away,” Harry eyed the wand the redhead was fingering. “Don’t point them at anyone. I’ve got one Hell of a story to tell, and we all need to be sitting for this. Now, sit.” No one moved. “Now.”

Rigidly, Ron lowered himself into a chair. Hermione, after receiving a reassuring nod from Harry, did the same. Dean sat as well, and Luna had never moved. Tom slowly took the seat beside Harry’s. “Alright. First off, you need to know, this isn’t the same Tom Riddle we all know and love.” Ron started to interrupt but Harry shot him a warning look. Glaring murderously at Tom, Ron quieted. “First off, what do you know about alternate universes?”

“Oh Harry...” Hermione.

“You can’t be serious!” Ron.

“Please tell me you’re not going to say what I think you’re going to say?” Dean.

“Look, just tell me: what do you know?” His voice was sharper than he’d intended after all the stress of the day.

Hermione sighed. “Well, it’s all just theory of course, but several scientists such as-”

“Hermione.”

She huffed. “Fine. They do exist, apparently. Are you saying that this...person we’re sitting with is an alternate version of Voldemort?”

“Rubbish,” Ron muttered.

“Yes. But I’m also saying that the months I was missing was because I was in an alternate universe with a different You-Know-

Who.” They stared at him as if he was crazy. “You think I’d lie about this?”

“Harry,” Tom reminded him.

Ron glanced at the Slytherin, his eyes narrowing even further as Harry visibly told himself to relax. “You’re friends,” he deadpanned.

Harry winced at the tone. “Yeah, we are. Just hear me out, alright?”

“Sure. I’ll hear you.”

“There’s no need to be sarcastic, Ronald.”

“I’ll be sarcastic if I want to, Hermione!”

“Are they always this childish?” The two froze upon hearing the snake language.

Harry gave Tom a grateful nod, guessing that had been his intention, and used the surprise it caused to break in before they could continue. “Luna can verify what I’m saying is true.”

“Luna?” Hermione echoed. “Why would Luna..?”

They all turned to her and she let out a sigh. “You could have proved this without me, Harry.”

“The story’s just a lot more interesting when you’ve involved,” he offered her a grin.

“Very well.” She straightened her robes. “I’m sure what Harry wants me to tell you is that I’m a member of the Will of Peverell.”

“The Will of who?” Dean asked in confusion.

“Peverell!” Hermione gasped.

They let Luna do the explaining, starting on who the Peverell brothers were, the Deathly Hallows, and what the Will did. Then she ended on the attack on Privet Drive and the necklace she had given to Harry.

“So let me get this straight,” Ron broke through the silence that had settled after she’d finished. “You-” he pointed at Luna “-are a member of a secret society whose purpose is to keep people from traveling to alternate universes?” Luna nodded. “And nargles exist?”

“Personally,” Hermione tried to smile, “I find that part harder to believe than the alternate universe theory.”

“It’s not a theory,” Harry persisted. It was his turn to recount everything that had happened. All of them listened with rapt attention as he described his time there. Hermione had gone pale the moment he’d told them about discovering Tom had the scar, and Harry guessed that she already knew where this was heading. For the rest of them, however, it was a shock when he finally told them who the Dark Lord was.

“That – that-” Ron sputtered. “That’s impossible!”

“And we..?” Hermione asked with dread.

“Yes. All of you are Death Eaters.”

He let them absorb the information for a while before continuing, finally ending on why they had returned in the first place. Hermione gasped. “Harry, you can’t be serious!”

“I am. Hopefully the two gits will duke it out and kill each other in the process,” he said darkly.

Ron gaped before announcing, “That is the most suicidal plan that I’ve heard in my entire life!”

Harry looked at him. “But it works, doesn’t it? And let’s face it: it’s pretty much a guarantee that they’re going to meet. One of them will die.”

Ron covered his face in his hands before letting them drop. "So somewhere out there, the teenage versions of Bellatrix Lestrange and Lucius Malfoy are running about?"

" 'Lestrange'?"

Harry quickly steered the conversation away from that particular topic, not liking the tone Tom was using. "Now what we have to do now is gather any of the Order members who are still here and come up with a plan." He paused and then added quietly, "I'm sorry I dragged you all into this. It...it was only supposed to be Voldemort."

Ron stopped frowning at the floor to gaze at him. "You're kidding, right? We'll fight by you, Harry. We went with you to the Department of Mysteries. We had your back there and we have your back here, as well."

"Exactly," Dean agreed. "Dumbledore's Army didn't train everyone to sit on the sidelines and watch. If you're going to fight, we will, too."

Tom couldn't help but be impressed by the loyalty shining in their eyes. A band of school children had gone to fight in the Department of Mysteries against seasoned Death Eaters just for Harry? When Tom had gone, it had been with the Order...

"And," Ron added, jerking his head at Tom, "I might not like it, but if you trust this bloke, I'll trust him, too."

Hermione slowly nodded. "If you can separate everyone from this universe from everyone in ours, so can we."

What felt like the first genuine smile in months appeared on Harry's lips. "Thank you."

A/N: Christmas Break! Miracles do happen...new year's is coming up, so happy new year in advance! Sorry for the long wait - this chapter was a struggle and finals didn't help :(

## Chapter Twenty

Draco groaned and stirred. His head...pounded...

"He's coming to," came a whisper from above him.

"Get ready," another warned. "The ferret's going to bolt the second he gets the chance."

Ferret?

His eyes snapped open.

Weasley and Granger were standing right above him.

"Salazar Sly-mmmfff!" A hand clapped over his mouth and knocked him back down. His back hit something marshmallow-soft. A mattress. He was on a bed – but how..? What..? And whose dirty hand was that on-? "Potter!"

The cool gaze in front of him sharpened and Draco felt himself tense. For a moment he thought he was wrong, that this wasn't the Golden Boy at all, but not even someone who'd make Crabbe and Goyle look like intellectuals would have carved a lightning bolt onto their foreheads. So, it was Potter. But a version of him that caused Draco's self-preservation instincts to fidget.

Slowly, Potter removed the offending limb and left it in his lap. "Malfoy," Potter stated. "Don't try to escape. You have five wands trained on you. Make this painless for yourself and just listen."

Draco didn't move.

Potter took his silence as a cue to resume. "What I'm going to tell you will sound strange, but it is the truth." He leaned forward ever so slightly and seemed to brace himself. But before he could say anything, Draco interrupted.

"Where are we?"

"I will get to that. But first, I have to explain the basics."

Draco narrowed his eyes. He swept up the rest of the room: Granger, Weasley, and – "You." It was that boy who'd been with Potter. The one who could speak Parseltongue.

He stood in the corner, watching with a degree of nonchalance that teetered on boredom. When Draco didn't break eye-contact for a while, he arched an eyebrow.

Ice scuttled down Draco's spine. Stiffly, he looked back at Potter. His fingers curled around the sheets under his palms. His mind whirled. Where in Merlin's name was he? Who was that other boy? Where was his father – and what was Potter going to do with him now?

"Malfoy."

"What?"

"I'm going to answer your question. You see," Potter's mouth tightened, "we are all in an alternate universe."

"What?"

"Even if you do manage to get out of here," Potter soldiered on, "you'll never be able to go home without our help. It's in your best interest to-"

"Do you take me for some sort of moron?"

Weasley glared. "That's rich, Malfoy. We have the courtesy to tell you what's going on and you throw it back in our faces. Thanks a lot."

"There are no such things as alternate universes!"

"As we discussed earlier," the unnerving boy in the back said to Weasley, now approaching with something akin to irritation, "it is irrelevant if he believes us or not."

"Yeah?" Weasley challenged.

Draco immediately noted the fact that the boy and Weasley didn't like each other – a wise decision on the mystery man's part – in case it would help him in the future.

Instead of rising to the challenge, the boy ignored it. "We're taken your wand," he informed Draco. "You are under our, shall we say, 'protection'? If you cause problems, we will transfigure you back into the Chocolate Frog Card you were a few seconds ago-"

Draco choked. "You...you transfigured me into a Chocolate Frog Card?"

"-and if you don't, you will have the privilege of remaining human."

He couldn't be serious, could he?

Swiftly, Draco looked at Potter, his cheat sheet.

He was unreadable.

"Do we understand each other?"

It was time to play smart. So with little choice, Draco nodded.

"Excellent." Then he turned to Harry. "Now, Harry, did you say you made breakfast?"

Wait, what?

"I did." Harry smiled and stood. The oppressive mood instantly died. "Everyone can join us. I made omelets."

Incredulity threw itself onto Draco's face. What the-? He was half convinced that all the fugitive activities had addled their brains. Which could only make it better for him, but still. Hope flaring in his chest, he mentally checked his pockets for his wand. Painfully, he realized they hadn't lied; he didn't feel its familiar weight at all. And to add insult to injury, all four of them had their wands gripped blatantly in their hands for him to see.



He was completely at their mercy. For now.

"Come on, Malfoy." Potter looked back at him over his shoulder. "You may as well take advantage of our generosity. We've got you right where we want you. There wouldn't be a point in poisoning you."

Draco sneered. But then Weasley's wand hand twitched and he decided to school his features into something less likely to result in bodily harm.

"Get in front, Malfoy."

"Oh, leave him alone," Granger sighed. "Even if he is at our backs, he can't do anything."

Draco flushed. Granger didn't have to rub it in, for Merlin's sake!

The Parselmouth began leading the way out the door and Draco forced himself to bite his tongue. As tempting as it usually was to spar with Weasley, sparring with him while he was on a power trip and Draco was defenseless just didn't seem like it would end in anyway other than giving his rational side 'I told you so' rights.

They walked, and Draco snuck glances around him. Not a single magical portrait or otherwise. The place was obviously muggle, but it was wealthy. Apparently muggles weren't completely debased after all.

Soon, they reached what must have been a kitchen, where Looney Lovegood and Dean Thomas were cooking vegetables. Potter and his friends began chatting. As they did, the Parselmouth slid into a stool surrounding the island.

Draco glided onto one after him and mined all the information he could out of their conversations. He learned that Ollivander was sickly and bedridden. Thomas had served him breakfast in bed. Griphook, whoever he was, had refused to eat in the same room as 'wand-carriers' and had somehow fetched his own food. A sickened Weasley revealed that he thought he'd seen Griphook out in the lawn

earlier. And as Malfoy wondered why Potter could cook so well, their voices suddenly became lower, heralding the appearance of an Important Matter.

"It is likely that the Order is still in Black Manor," The Parselmouth said. "Dumbledore had placed it under Fidelus ever since Hadrian made it obvious that he didn't have the courtesy to stay dead." His lip curled a fraction. "My birthday is in a matter of days, so we have to head there immediately."

Weasley blinked. "Er...happy birthday?"

The Parselmouth shot him an amused look, but an instant later, he frowned and noticeably avoided looking at him. His expression darkened.

"I still don't think we should be discussing this in front of him." Weasley jabbed a finger at Draco.

"Even if he somehow got in contact with Voldemort," Potter pointed out, "it doesn't matter what he knows about the Order in this world. Besides, it could help us."

"I'm sitting right here."

"Sorry."

Silence descended. Draco privately frowned to himself. Potter actually believed what he was saying. He honestly thought they were in some kind of alternate world. Could he..? No. That was ridiculous. And he'd be damned before he endured the humiliation of believing such rubbish when Potter was the one dishing it out. These people were keeping him prisoner. Nothing they said could be fully trusted.

And honestly, 'alternative universe'?

Granger spoke. "How many Order members do you think are still free?"

"I can't presume to know. I'm sure a duel would have broken out at the conference once Hadrian revealed himself. As I recall, Dumbledore was near the corner; he might have been able to get out in time. Or he could have tried to hold Hadrian off and been captured."

"Or killed," Ron muttered.

"Yes," the Parselmouth had to allow. "Or killed."

Potter drummed his fingers against the counter. "Who will be the new head of the Order if Dumbledore isn't there?"

"In normal circumstances, it would be Abraxus, Lucius' father."

What?

"But since his condition is..." Tom trailed off and Harry nodded in understanding.

Condition? What condition?

"It will probably be Mr. Dolohov."

"Dolohov?"

No! Idiot, remember: Potter is insane. There are no alternate universes!

"Andy's father. In either case, we'll have to inform them of the situation and they won't like it. And if it is Dolohov...then we really will have to watch our backs."

"They won't take it well."

"No. They won't. However, just because they don't like the situation, doesn't mean they won't do what needs to be done."

"Hmm." Harry took a sip from his cup, considering.

Breakfast dwindled to a close. The Parselmouth Conjured a piece of paper, Summoned a pen from another room, and began writing on it in sweeping, elegant cursive. He passed it around the table and just before it reached Draco, Weasley snatched it. Draco jumped.

Weasley, glaring at him, pointed his wand at the paper. It burst into flames. "So he doesn't get any ideas."

Draco restrained a delicate snort. Did Weasley really think he was daft? He was a Slytherin; he wouldn't do something so obviously subversive. In fact, as Draco had been listening, he'd had time to reconsider his approach to this whole mess. His instinctive reaction had been to mock and resist them. To display his resentment and make himself a difficulty. But now he opted for a new tactic: feigned surrender.

He might not believe what Potter was saying, but Potter did. What Draco needed to do was to lull the group into a false sense of security. He wouldn't be a nuisance; he'd be an angel. He'd outwardly believe whatever they said and do whatever they did. And then, when he had his opportunity, he would escape. Laughing.

"Tom," Potter said, and Draco finally learned the Parselmouth's name. "Look." He motioned to the nearest window.

"What is it?"

Grimly, Granger said, "Death Eaters."

Winter frosted the room. Outside, figures in crimson robes and golden masks lingered at the border of what Draco recognized as blood wards. They didn't have the icy, predatory quality that Draco had become accustomed to. Instead, they radiated a feral, bloodthirsty air.

Tom smiled coldly. "Hadrian must have ordered a reception party for our return."

"Those," Draco pitched his voice to a nervous whisper, "are Death Eaters?"

The Golden Trio glanced at him in surprise. "Yes," Potter eventually answered. "Those are Death Eaters."

Draco paused and let a significant silence fill. "I see," he then said. And then, so he wouldn't seem like he was switching personalities: "Or people you think are Death Eaters." Inwardly, he rolled his eyes. There was no way those clowns were the Dark Lord's servants.

Potter sighed.

"Is the Floo network connected here?" Thomas asked.

"It used to be," Tom replied.

"What do you mean?"

"The Death Eaters likely took it down."

More silence. It was all very dramatic. Draco glanced around him before breaking it. "Let's say, that I believe you – and I'm not saying I do," he added quickly in a show of denial. "Then...then how many are surrounding us?"

"You believe us?" Weasley asked skeptically.

"I said if I believe you, not that I do."

He began to open his mouth but Granger shook her head and he closed it. "Fine. Git brings up a point, though. Do they have a usual number?"

"Twenty seven for a squad. Three for a fireteam. Since Tom and I are good fighters, though, I'm betting on the twenty seven."

Draco restrained a comment about inflated heads.

"Well then," Loony said, "we should check the Floo just in case. And if that won't work, then we shouldn't keep our guests waiting."

Potter flashed her a smile and Tom left, vanishing somewhere into the mansion to test out the fireplace. He came back minutes later, reporting with resignation that they had been severed.

They then began to discuss their escape plans. Draco caught the gist of it, which involved a slew of invisible snakes set to attack the Death Eaters while an equally invisible Granger identified and took out whichever Death Eater was maintaining the anti-apparation wards. He didn't pay too much attention because as they puzzled out solutions, he was considering his own.

Potter and friends planned to reach Black Manor. Draco highly doubted it was the same Black Manor that belonged to his maternal aunt and uncle, but since Potter did believe he was in an 'alternate universe', he supposed it was possible he was suicidal enough to try. But either way, it didn't matter.

The Parselmouth had ruled out apparition, explaining that in the event that someone was captured, there would be one-way anti-apparation wards tacked onto and the existing Fidelus - you could apparate out, but not in. If enemies wanted to reach the Manor, they would have to know where it was, walk on foot to the gate, and then overcome all the defenses on it. That meant that apparating nearby was an option, but Death Eaters could be crawling the surrounding area. In the end, the easiest way to bypass them was to use the Floo, and the nearest public Floo was in Diagon Alley. Only people keyed into the wards could use it to get into Black Manor.

All of this left plenty of opportunities along this road trip for Draco to alert the public to his imprisoned state.

Suddenly, a hand seized his arm.

Draco jumped and whirled around, narrowing his eyes at Tom. "May I help you with something?"

He hesitated for a moment, his eyes running over Draco's face. "I apologize in advance for this."

"Pardon? What are you-?"

"Confundo."

The world was a blur. When his muddled thoughts finally became understandable, Draco vaguely became aware that his surroundings were familiar. Dim light...the clink of glass...

"What's wrong with him?" came a voice from nearby.

"Oh, him." Loony? "Wrackspurt's got him. He's coming to again."

Someone gave him a shake. That face – Draco's attention snapped back. "You!" His red hair was now brown and his nose was longer than usual, but all of that definitely belonged to Weasley.

"Keep it down, Malfoy," he hissed. "Try not to make a scene."

"What did you do to me?"

"Riddle Confounded you. Couldn't have you apparating away once the anti-apparation wards were down, see."

Knowing 'Riddle' must have been the Parselmouth, Draco clenched his jaw. He hadn't even thought of that.

"Come on," Potter said as he turned back. "Let's go." He started towards the Floo and immediately Draco recognized where they were. The war had made it even more tense and gloomy than he'd remembered, and the sullen patrons didn't dare make eye-contact as they drank and sighed over their newspapers. The Leaky Cauldron.

No. No! He had to leave – Draco had to tell someone what was happening. Who knew how long it would take him to find another way out?

His eyes darted around, landing on patron after patron. If he could only –

"Hey, wait," the same voice from before jumped in.

Potter froze. The group tensed.

"Sorry, ladies and gents, but I can't let you use the Floo until I see some ID."

"ID?" Potter repeated.

Weasley cursed under his breath.

"You know the rules." He tapped a thick finger on a poster behind him. 'Please Abide by the Regulations' it read, followed by a list. At the bottom shone a Ministry seal with a finely cut signature beside it. "No one wants to get in trouble, now."

Granger was the first to recover. "Oh, we're so sorry, sir. We hadn't even planned to use the Floo, so we didn't bring our IDs."

The barkeeper – since when had they replaced Tom? - frowned. "All seven of you?"

Luna smiled appealingly. "It was stupid of us, but please, can you let us through, just this once?"

He hesitated only a moment before shaking his head. "I wish I could, but I can't risk it. Not with everything that's going on. Sorry." With that, he started to turn away, and Potter and his friends exchanged looks, silently trying to communicate what they should do.

"Wait, sir," Dean decided to try. "We...just want to get back to Hogwarts."

The barkeeper stopped. And was it Draco's imagination, or did the voices in the pub quiet?

"Hogwarts?"

No, it definitely wasn't his imagination.

"No one is allowed in there without special permission." His eyes narrowed. "Who exactly did you say you all were?"



Potter's head whipped in the direction of the Floo and back. "We, er..."

Draco seized his opportunity.

"Argh!" Weasley doubled over as Draco stabbed him in the ribs with his elbow. He made a mad grab for Draco, but he darted out of the way and shoved him right into Potter. Both of them crashed to the floor in a tangle of limbs and surprised exclamations.

"What are you doing?" the barkeeper roared.

"Get him!"

"Stop!"

But Draco had no intention of doing that. He hurled himself at the Floo powder, seized it, and threw it in the fireplace. "Hogwarts, Headmaster's Office!"

The Parselmouth shouted a spell, but it was too late. The flames enveloped Draco and the Leaky Cauldron vanished in a whirlwind of green.

Brief images of other fireplaces, all too quick to see, flashed in his eyes. Then the flames dwindled. Draco dashed out and reached for his wand, only to remember that Potter had taken it. "Merlin!" He needed to stop them from coming through. But what? What could – there!

The headmaster's chair was behind the desk. Draco grabbed and shoved it as far into the fireplace as he could manage. His heart thundered and blood roared in his ears. "Try to come through that," he tried to crow.

A few seconds passed. Then it became apparent that Potter & Pals weren't coming after him. Draco allowed himself to breathe again and take in his surroundings. Portraits protested loudly, some of them marching out of their frames to fetch someone to get him in trouble.

Draco didn't care. Headmaster Snape wouldn't hurt him and the Carrows certainly wouldn't, either.

A laugh tainted with hysteria tumbled out of his mouth. Thank Merlin. Potter and the Parselmouth, with their talk of alternate universes. What rubbish. "Idiots, all of them," he said. But he couldn't exactly hold it against them. So, what should he do with information of their plans?

He didn't like Potter, Granger, Weasley, or any of the Gryffindors, but he pitied them. Sympathized, even. They were fighting to protect their loved ones from a madman just as he was. But when the Dark Lord inevitably caught up with them, Draco wasn't going to be standing there by Potter's side, begging to get hit by a Killing Curse. And now that he'd been separated, who knew what the Dark Lord would think? He might torture him as punishment for 'incompetence'. And so his father would be tortured as well, simply for the crime of bringing such a useless servant into this world. But...but there was nowhere else to go.

Draco let out a shuddering breath and straightened. He needed to give the Dark Lord something to beg forgiveness. He hated how the Malfoys had been reduced to this, but he just needed to hold on a bit longer. The war would be over soon, one way or another, and all that mattered was that the Malfoys were on the winning side. The Dark Lord's side.

Telling himself to wash away those morbid thoughts, Draco pushed open the double doors leading out of the office. For a moment he just stood there, savoring the fact that he was back at Hogwarts. Safe. Not for long, but at this second, he could enjoy this. For once, in months, he wasn't under the thumb of the Dark Lord, other Death Eaters, or even a former classmate.

The feeling was short lived. With a sigh, Draco strode over to the staircase. He was about to place his foot on the first step when the stairs churned and footsteps thundered up it.

A mop of chaotic hair announced the arrival of a grizzled man seconds before he spotted Draco. "There he is!"

Bewildered, Draco didn't even have time to react before the unknown man seized the front of his robes and dug a wand into his neck. "What are you doing?" Draco exclaimed. "Get off me!"

He received a derisive sneer in response. "Let's see..." Two other wizards arrived behind him, wands out and trained on Draco. "Blonde hair, snooty attitude, dreadfully inbred...you must be a Malfoy."

"W-what?"

"Strange. Last time I heard, you had your hair long. It's some tradition of your kind, isn't it?"

Draco finally recovered. He'd dealt with people like this for months since the Department of Mysteries fiasco. They were sharks, and he would not give them a wound to smell. "Who do you think you are?" He raised his chin higher. "Do you know who my father is? Do you know who I am?"

The three of them burst into chuckles. "How is good old Abraxus these days? Last I heard, he was feeling a bit under the weather."

Abraxus? What on earth were these people blabbering about?

But Draco refused to let his confusion show on his face. "Release me. Now."

"Oh, I don't think we will. I don't know how a little snot like you managed to get in and out of Hogwarts, but I'm sure that the Rook will be very interested to hear just how you did it."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Draco wrinkled his nose at him. "Now unhand me before the Carrows teach a mudblood like you a much needed lesson."

Three sharp inhalations came from his captors.

For a moment, the world stood still.

And then their faces flushed in fury. "Crucio!"

A scream ripped itself free from Draco's throat. His limbs flailed against the ground. Agony ignited every nerve of his body. The part of his mind still capable of coherent thought pleaded for it to stop –

It ended.

All of a sudden, he was aware of his ragged breaths, his trembling, and the cold feel of the floor.

A meaty hand wrenched him to his feet. "Do you want to insult your betters again, inbreed?" the grisly man hissed, putrid breath hitting Draco's face. "Go on – say it. Give me an excuse."

Draco struggled to keep as far away from him as possible. He earned a backhand to the cheek for his efforts.

"Say it."

The hand rose again and Draco couldn't help but cringe.

"Four," the tallest of the trio interrupted. "The Rook ordered us not to hurt the students unless we had to."

"What makes you think we don't have to? Don't you think we should teach this runt a lesson, Six?"

"The Rook would want to do it himself. I've heard he and the Malfoys have a history."

'Four' considered for a second before giving a reluctant jerk of his head. "Take his wand." Draco had no choice but to stay still when a hand dove into his pockets and then checked his wrists.

"There's nothing here."

Another sneer. "The inbred swine came to Hogwarts without even a wand? Ha! Can you imagine how many times his ancestors must have married their siblings?"

"Don't insult-!" Another smack to the head cut him off. "Ahh!"

"Shut up. I'm sure the Rook will be overjoyed to hear that the Lucius Malfoy that traitor stole from Headquarters finally did something to justify a little 'discipline'." He laughed and Draco paled.

They had mistaken him for his father? "Wait – I'm not – not Lucius Malfoy!"

They just continued laughing.

Draco frantically tried to see his options. Now that his brain was catching up, he realized he couldn't tell them who he was. They'd use him against his parents. And who were these people? His father had been disgraced, but not enough for the Dark Lord to declare open season on him!

No, he had to think. He had to get out of this. Snape – Snape would vouch for him! "I demand to see Headmaster Snape."

"Headmaster Snape? The inbreeding must be even worse than I thought. There is no 'Headmaster Snape'. The Rook is headmaster. Now shut up and get moving."

Draco's last thread of hope died. There was nothing he could do except put on the Malfoy mask and endure whatever was coming with as much dignity as he could muster. As they marched him down the stairwell and through the hall, he straightened, pulled his shoulders back, and held his head high.

Students drifted through the halls, some wary, some proud, and others fearful. It seemed that anything, living or animated, was watching him. The back of Draco's neck prickled and aside from the obvious impending doom, he wasn't sure why.

"Is that Lucius?" a girl whispered.

"What did he do?"

"I thought he was in Muggle Studies?"

I'm not my father! He wanted to snap. Merlin, why was everyone here acting so stupid?

A frown flitted across his brow as he spotted a pack of students that had to be in or close to his year. Oddly enough, he didn't recognize them at all. They must be muggleborns, he reasoned, and then realized that they couldn't be. All the muggleborns were banned from Hogwarts when the year began.

He brushed it off, concentrating on keeping his calm and in control façade up. Then time passed, and he realized why that uneasy feeling kept on increasing.

He didn't recognize anyone.

"Harry," Tom whispered just behind Harry's shoulder. "He's slipping."

Tensing, Harry looked back at the barkeeper. The vacant look in his eyes only looked worse with his unhinged jaw. Magic, strong and sure, surged through Harry's wand hand and locked onto the man. Close your mouth, Harry mentally commanded, and the barkeeper shut it.

The whole room had gone silent the instant Malfoy had made a break for it, and all eyes were on them.

Let us leave.

The glaze over the barkeeper's eyes faded and he scowled at the fireplace. "That little...now look what he did!" He snatched up the broom in the corner and stalked over to the mantel. "Bloody kids. No respect for their elders...you!" He hurled a finger at them. "Get out! I don't need your kind screwing up this place any further, thank you very much."

"Obliviate," Harry heard Hermione whisper, and noticed the tip of her wand peeking out from beneath her robe sleeves.

"Our sincerest apologies, sir," Tom replied, the regret and chagrin smeared across his face so well-crafted that Harry felt a spark of admiration amidst the churning in his gut.

He just looked at them in confusion. "Huh?"

Quietly, the group slunk out of the door, with Harry instructing the barkeeper to continue cleaning. Had he overpowered the spell? Was that why he'd stripped his victim completely of independent thought? Surely no one could direct two lives at the same time at such a minute level for months, like the Death Eaters in his word had managed.

His stomach flipped. Why was that what he cared about? Shouldn't his main concern be that he'd just used an Unforgivable?

The cold London air assailed them as they stepped outside. Hermione looked at Harry, her lips pressed in a thin line and her face almost unreadable. "I've taken care of it," she said in a low voice. "You can...let go."

With relief, Harry ended the spell, a chill that had nothing with the weather scuttling down his spine. "Thanks."

All three of them exchanged glances. No one spoke for a moment. Then Tom said, "I can apparate each of you near Black Manor. We can-"

"Wait," Ron cut him off.

"Yes?"

"What about Malfoy?"

Silence.

Ron looked around. "What? Come on, I hate the ferret, but...he just threw himself in there. In a castle filled with Death Eaters! He doesn't even have a wand. He-"

"We know," Tom interrupted.

Dean swore and dragged a hand through his short cropped hair. "We can't do anything about it, Ron. He's gone. We've to let this go."

"Gone?" Ron echoed. Anger flashed. "You can't just dismiss the git as 'gone'. He's a human being! Harry," he turned to his friend, "you don't agree with...with..?" He trailed off.

For a moment, Harry couldn't meet his eye. Was this what Dumbledore felt when people looked to him for direction? He suddenly saw the old headmaster in a completely different light. As such as he cared for the headmaster, he'd seen him as a manipulator, but now, when Harry had to be the one weighing lives, he felt some of his resentment fading.

He looked back. "I'm sorry, Ron. He's...dead."

"You don't know that."

"Ron," Hermione gently took his arm, "you said it yourself: he just walked into a Death Eater stronghold. Even if he is still alive, how are we supposed to rescue him? If this fireplace requires an ID, so will all the rest. And our chances of fighting everyone in Hogwarts and surviving are the same as entering an Inner Circle meeting and coming out alive."

"There are other people we need to think about," Tom added.

Ron shot him a glare. "Didn't expect you to say anything less, Riddle."

"Excuse me?"

"Figures the future dark lord would-"



"Enough." Harry grabbed Ron's shoulder and he fell silent. "This isn't getting us anywhere. Tom, apparate us. Even if we don't make it into the manor, it's safer than the magical world. If we do get in, we can talk this over in a safe place."

Dean hesitated. "Don't worry, Ron. I'm a pretty good artist. Maybe I can forge an ID for us to get in?"

Ron didn't answer.

Taking his attention off Ron, Tom transfigured their robes into muggle clothes and then grabbed Harry's arm. The uncomfortable feeling of apparition ripped through them and suddenly, both were standing in a park under the shade of an oak tree. Framing it was a long road devoid of cars, and Harry blinked as the seemingly endless landscape across the road shimmered, colors and shapes that hadn't existed before painting themselves into live. A towering neoclassical manor glowed in front of them, jet-black tiles plating its roof and soaring Corinthian columns decorating the entrance's portico. Wrought iron gates and thick, tall walls snaked around the entire landscape. "Wow."

"We need to apparate the others," Tom said, still a hint annoyed from what Ron had said. Once they were done, Tom ushered them back under the oak tree. "Wait here. Harry can cast a patronus for us." He paused. "Send it to Dolohov, and tell him 'the Hat almost put you in Hufflepuff'."

Ron snorted in disbelief and Harry glanced back in surprise.

Hermione explained, "We had a run-in with a Dolohov."

"Oh."

"It isn't important."

Nodding reluctantly, Harry turned in the direction of the manor and pointed his wand at it. "Expecto Patronum." Immediately, a silvery glowing stag cascaded out of the tip and galloped toward the gates.

Like last time, unfortunately, it couldn't make it past the wards, and Harry deflated slightly.

"Don't worry," Tom said. "The gates notify the house-elves of visitors. As long as no Death Eaters are nearby to attack us as we wait, we'll be alright."

Grateful for their muggle clothes and disguised faces, Harry cast muffliato and the group tried to act like typical muggle teens to divert onlookers who would inevitably see the patronus as it raced down the road.

"So," Dean fished for a topic. "Harry."

"Yeah?"

"How's the campeador thing going?"

Oh. Yeah, he figured he'd need to give his friends a demonstration of his abilities sooner or later. "Pretty well. I spent some time-" in Hadrian's headquarters "-learning some mixed martial arts. You know."

"Yeah? Did you hit any weights?"

"Er, well it would be kind of hard to, since they wouldn't help all that much..."

Hermione questioned, "You can't just..." She lowered her voice. "Turn it off?"

Harry considered. "I guess I should be able to turn it off since it's an internal magic. I can definitely up my strength, fortify my bones, and...well, I don't know what exactly my magic does to my skin, since it doesn't break on high impact. I should be able to do the opposite."

Dean appraised him. "No wonder you don't look more muscular. I figured someone would have told you how to make yourself into an athlete."

"He's an athlete," Ron protested. "He's a star quidditch player!"

"Quidditch? Seriously? That might get your endurance and some of your thigh muscles, but quidditch just doesn't work you out like a gym does."

Luna turned her dreamy gaze on him. "Do you go to the gym, Dean?"

"Yes. Every summer. I play football with my muggle friends; you have to be strong if you want to be any good." He added, "Harry, if we have any time I'll give you the Sparknotes on strength training. But you should probably know that 80% of it comes from what you put in your mouth. After Hogwarts food, it's not going to be pretty."

Tom smirked. "Say goodbye to those treacle tarts, Harry."

Harry elbowed him – Tom laughed – and smiled at Dean. "Thanks. If this campeador stuff augments what I already have, you'll make me that much stronger."

A crunch. Harry's smile faded and he feigned a stretch to give himself an excuse to turn his head back.

There were two men and a woman walking down the street, all in muggle clothes, but they were staring at them.

"What is it?" Dean asked through a fake grin for onlookers, as if someone had just said something funny.

"Three people. I don't know if they're Death Eaters or not."

Luna waved to the trio.

"Wha-?" Horrified, Hermione snatched her hand. "What are you doing?"

"Look."

They did. The possible Death Eaters exchanged glances so quickly that they might not have noticed if they weren't looking for it. Then they forced smiles and waved back.

Luna turned back to Hermione and the Death Eaters continued walking. "See?" she asked. "They think we're some neighbor's kids."

"Intelligent," Tom commented.

"Thank you."

It was only a few minutes before Harry heard another faint 'pop' of apparition. His gaze strayed in the noise's direction, but he couldn't see anything...except for depressions in the grass where large footsteps were crushing the grass. He nudged Tom.

Tom's eyes narrowed. A Death Eater, or..?

"Mr. Riddle," a chipped, deep voice sounded from the air.

Luna was the only one aside from Harry and Tom who didn't jump.

Careful not to turn his head back, Tom greeted, "Mr. Dolohov. Thank you for coming."

"Who are these people?"

There was a sharp edge to his voice that caused Tom to tense. "Friends. We're all disguised. Please, take us into the manor. We'll explain everything then." He nodded in the direction of the Death Eaters, who had stopped at the corner of the park. "We think they're Hadrian's."

They heard Dolohov's footsteps fading away as he walked over to the problem.

"Get ready," Tom instructed. "As soon as Dolohov makes a scene, we need to run to the gate and get in."

"What about Dolohov?"

"Hopefully we'll all be inside quickly and then he can run into the gate before the entire squad comes by."

They waited for the first Death Eater to drop. The instant he did, they all dashed across the street.

A magical signal flare exploded in the air.

"Merlin!" Ron cursed.

Tom seized the front of the gates. "Open up!" he shouted, cancelling the transfiguration spells on his face. "We need-"

The gate lurched open.

"In, in!"

Harry hesitated, his attention darting towards Dolohov. Tom gave him a push and he stumbled through the gate. He heard Dolohov's boots pounding on the pavement, then –

"Aaargh!"

Gritting his teeth, Tom rushed back to the gate again, Harry diving into a kneel beside him and shielding them both as Tom cast. "Accio Dolohov!"

The mound of robes containing a now visible Dolohov raced into view, blood smearing the side of his leg. Hermione shot a shield out to protect him from a curse and Tom flung spell after spell at the Death Eaters. They couldn't open the gates, because if the Death Eaters set foot on Black property, the Fidelius would be exposed. But they were getting nowhere, even with Dean and Hermione cocooning Dolohov in protections.

Dread fell on Tom as he realized they might have to leave him behind. Dolohov, who was probably leader of the Order of the Phoenix.

"Luna!" Harry called. "Shield us!"

Tom didn't have time to respond before Harry Conjured a rock and hurled it at the nearest Death Eater so fast that his eyes hadn't even properly registered it before a sickening crack pierced the air and a scream tore after it.

Shocked, Tom faltered in his casting. The Death Eater's broken arm was practically severed.

In the distraction, Harry Conjured another rock, and another. Spells were slow enough to dodge or shield against; his throws were not.

It was grizzly and revolting. A plume of nausea slithered through Tom's gut. But he couldn't deny that Stunning the Death Eaters was easy afterwards.

In the aftermath, Dolohov slowly crawled to one leg, hissing as he tried to put pressure on the other. Rage and loathing contorted his face.

Tom was about to open the door, when suddenly, Dolohov aimed his wand at a fallen Death Eater. "Avada Kedavra!" Emerald green stabbed into the lifeless body. It jerked. "Avada Kedavra!"

"W-wait!" Ron croaked.

"Avada Kedavra."

Silence.

A sneer twisting his mouth, Dolohov limped to the gates. They opened, and he nodded curtly to each of them. "Good work."

Harry had a livid, torn expression on his face, while Tom was oddly rigid. Ron and Hermione had gone white. Dean still couldn't understand what had just happened. And Luna refused to look in Dolohov's direction.

"That's it?" Ron blurted, anger rising up his neck and flooding his cheeks. "You're just going to leave them out there?"

Dolohov paused. "You're right, boy." He turned. "Incendio Maximus!"

A torrent of fire exploded on the side walk, devouring the bodies with greedy, vicious, crimson flames. The firestorm shrieked and snarled, whipping over the street and burning so hot that even from where they stood, their skin blistered with heat.

"Oh, Merlin," Hermione moaned.

"What are you doing?" Ron cried almost hysterically. "You lunatic – stop it! Stop it!"

The flames vanished. Only three piles of ash remained.

Dolohov put away his wand and glared at Ron. "My duty. Now let's get back in."

"You madman! Why the Hell should we go anywhere with you?"

Pointedly, Tom cleared his throat, giving him a beseeching look.

Ron snapped, "I don't think so, Riddle. You saw what he did – he's crazy!"

"I don't need to listen to the quibbling of a stupid little boy," Dolohov said, limping away from them. "People like you would rather we let them go on their merry way to slaughter our side left, right, and center."

Ron opened his mouth to respond but had no words. Eventually, he stammered, "Well that's...what you did is just...it's...wrong."

Dolohov laughed mockingly, turning his head briefly over his shoulder so Ron could see just how much of an insect he thought he was. "This is war, you fool. Or did you think this was all a game?"

His jaw clenched, Harry put an arm on Ron's shoulder. Somehow, though his whole being protested, he gave a sharp jerk of his head.

Ron tore his arm away.

"Ron, please," Harry struggled to say. "It's done. I'm sorry, but...let's just...not make it worse."

"Harry-"

"I know." His eyes bore into Dolohov's back. "I know. But we're pushing it already. Just...let it go." He didn't look at Ron; it was bad enough that from the corner of his eye, he was giving him a look that suggested he didn't even recognize who was standing next to him.

The walk up the hill to the entrance of Black Manor was deathly silent.

Dolohov spelled open the door, glaring at the terrified house-elf that waited for his arrival. "Get the rest of the Order!" he barked. "Tell them the Chosen One has been found."

The elf squeaked and rapidly bowed. She disappeared with a 'pop' and Dolohov, who'd forgotten her already, pointed his wand at his leg and growled out healing spells. The blood dribbling down his calve clotted, but he didn't add any weight to it. Instead, his hazel eyes travelled over Tom's 'entourage', drinking in their appearances one by one.

They had to try not to fidget.

"So," he said slowly, his eyes narrowing on Harry. "I think it's time your friends took off their disguises, Mr. Riddle."

Everyone but Dolohov stiffened. "Ah, Mr. Dolohov," Tom began, "may I ask if the Headmaster happened to..?"

"He wasn't captured."

Tom let out a small sigh of relief.

"But he isn't here at the moment. Are you going to take off the spells or not?"



Couldn't they just say 'not'? Harry wondered hopelessly. He had no idea what to use as an excuse, and from the glances everyone was exchanging, neither did they. Dolohov's eyes narrowed.

"Mr. Dolohov, we need to explain before we remove the spells," Tom chose his words carefully. Order members were beginning to arrive, and he saw Mrs. Black entering the foyer.

"Tom!" she exclaimed. "Thank goodness; we didn't know what had happened to you...and who are these people? Hogwarts students?"

Tom seized the distraction. "Mrs. Black, I hope you didn't worry too much. These are my friends. They helped keep me safe from Hadrian's soldiers – and they are exhausted from our time on the run. If you have any spare rooms..?" He gestured for the Gryffindors to follow him as he took a step towards the door, trying to stifle the anxiety threatening to break across his face.

Catching on, Harry quickly followed. Maybe they could brush the spell stripping off -

"Not so fast, Mr. Riddle."

Damn.

Tom turned a disarming smile on Dolohov. "Please, sir. We've been through quite an ordeal."

"A few more seconds won't damage them."

Mrs. Black frowned. "What is this about?"

Dolohov pointed at Harry. "These children have disguised their faces with transfiguration, and now, so strangely, seem to hesitate to remove them. Why is that, I wonder?"

"Tom?"

Tom winced. "It would be in everyone's best interest if we spoke to Headmaster Dumbledore first."

"What have you done, Riddle?"

"We've worked together for several years, Mr. Dolohov. Surely by now you know I have the Order's best interests at heart?"

"And yet you ask us to invite complete strangers into our safe house and refuse to divulge their identities. Who are these children, Riddle? What is it about their identities that you can't bear for us to see? Or is it, perhaps, that you know we wouldn't approve?"

Struggling to keep his irritation at the patronization from showing, Tom said evenly, "I have my reasons."

"Not good enough!" Dolohov snapped. "My son is imprisoned in Hogwarts – so is your darling Bellatrix and your friend, Lucius. Only you escaped, Riddle. You, our Chosen One. Everyone in the Order has sacrificed tooth and nail for you, and yet you refuse to let anyone but Dumbledore see your machinations. I don't think so."

"Sir, I apologize if I ever gave that impression," Tom tried not to hiss, "but perhaps we can discuss this later? My friends-"

But Dolohov didn't care what Tom was about to say. Before he could finish, Dolohov whirled around and hurled a spell at Harry and Ron. They were standing three feet away, a distance too small for a normal person to even twitch. But Harry wasn't a normal person. In an instant, he moved as a blur, dodging the spell and yanking Ron down all in one motion.

Dolohov's mouth dropped open. Mrs. Black gasped. And everyone else froze.

One.

Two.

Three...

Dolohov's face twisted. "Campeador! Order, seize them – take them to the cellars!"

"No!" Tom shouted. "Dolohov, listen to me – they are our allies. The Headmaster-"

"Take Riddle, too," he hissed. "Verify that he isn't Imperiused. You Death Eaters," he directed at the Gryffindors, "have made a serious error today."

"We aren't Death Eaters!" Harry shot back. "If you would just listen, we could explain everything."

"Remove your disguises."

"We-"

"I said remove. Your. Disguises."

For a moment, no one breathed. And then Harry realized there was no point in hiding it any longer. Slowly, he lifted his wand – the Order tensed – and removed the spells. His disguise fell away, and several people swore. "Lock us up if you have to," he said coolly. "Dumbledore will set you straight if we don't."

Dolohov gave a cold smile. "I will." He jerked his head and the seven order members that had gathered near the doors surrounded them, their wands out.

Shooting a short, forced smile at Tom, Harry nodded to the rest of his friends and let the Order march them down, down, into the cellars.

A/N: It's been so long but now I'm back! I'm not going to give excuses; the truth is that after so many people PMed or reviewed long after that last chapter, I realized I had to finish this story. I started it when I was just beginning high school, and was terribly (lol, just read my past A/N's! ^^) insecure about my writing. I gained so much confidence because of your feedback. Your support has been truly humbling. I want to give a special thank you and apology to those of you who've been waiting for so long (Brain Fluff, I'm definitely looking

at you)! But don't worry - I've got the rest of the story plotted out, so I promise, you won't have to wait another crazy amount of time to see this to the end :) As a thank you, I ought to complete this.

Thanks for reading! I'll try to get the next chapter up as soon as possible :)

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